

CEMETERY DANCE



WINTER 1993 / Volume Five, Issue One

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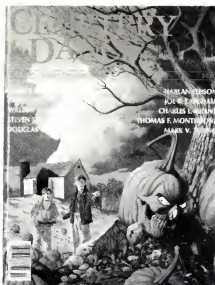
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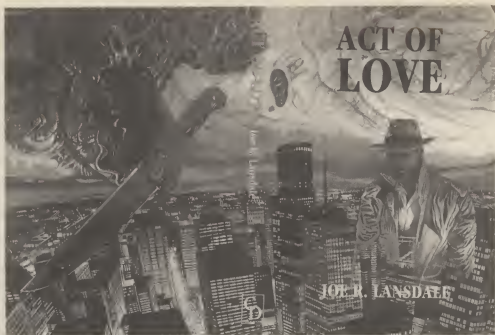
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CEMETERY DANCE MAGAZINE

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FICTION

HOPE	Steve Bevan	4
THE FLOOD	John MacLay	8
SECRET STRANGERS	Thomas Tessier	18
THOSE KIDS AGAIN	Wayne Allen Sallee & Norman Partridge	40
MEET THE BEETLES	J. Charles Caruso	54
EQUAL OPPORTUNITY	Edward Lee	71
THE MASK OF TRUTH HAS MANY HOLES	Lionel Fenn	86

DEPARTMENTS

WORDS FROM THE EDITOR	Richard T. Chizmar	3
RAMBLINGS FROM THE DARK	Charles L. Grant	13
GORMANIA	Ed Gorman	16
TRASH THEATRE	Joe R. Lansdale & David Webb	26
MOTHERS AND FATHERS ITALIAN ASSOCIATION	Thomas F. Monteleone	30
A CONVERSATION WITH CLIVE BARKER	T. Liam McDonald	36
NIGHTMARE ALLEY	Matthew J. Costello	46
NEEDFUL KINGS & OTHER THINGS	Tyson Blue	49
BOOK REVIEWS	Edward Bryant	60
HORROR QUIZ	A.R. Morlan	65
SPOTLIGHT ON PUBLISHING (Featuring Roadkill Press)	Bob Morrish	66
A CONVERSATION WITH MELANIE TEM	Stefan Dziemianowicz	74
ANTHOLOGY ATTIC	Kathryn Ptacek	79
ROUGH CUTS	Paul Sammon	82
CD REVIEWS	Various reviewers	97

WORDS FROM THE EDITOR

RICHARD T. CHIZMAR

CEMETERY DANCE #15 — Welcome back to another issue of *Cemetery Dance*, the magazine of dark mystery, suspense, and horror. If you have picked us up from a book or specialty store and are reading us for the first time . . . we hope you enjoy this Winter Issue. And we hope you are impressed enough to subscribe or keep an eye out for the Spring Issue, due in retail stores the second week of May.

◆ ◆ ◆

Our third *CD Publications* hardcover — a signed, limited edition of Joe R. Lansdale's first novel, *Act of Love* — was released several weeks ago, so this seems like a good time and place to tell you what direction the company is heading.

After an extremely busy autumn/winter — we released two issues of the magazine and two hardcover books in just three months(!) — we'll be looking to do more of the same in 1993. Our Spring release is *Thrillers*, the debut volume of a new dark suspense/horror series. The first hardcover will feature an Introduction by Joe R. Lansdale, and original fiction (20,000 words each) from Rex Miller, Nancy Collins, Chet Williamson, and Ardath Mayhar. I now have all the material on file, and I can promise you that you are in for quite a treat. Dark, moody, suspenseful fiction from all four writers. In addition, this will be the first *CD* hardcover to feature extensive interior artwork (a dozen full-page illustrations in each volume). This book will go on advance sale any day now, so look for a flyer or color catalog in the mail, or an advertisement in the next issue of the magazine.

Our Fall release will be the long-awaited major short story collection from Joe R. Lansdale — *Writer of the Purple Rage*. This book will reprint all of Joe's recent story appearances and a very significant portion will feature original, never-before-published fiction.

We will also release titles later this Summer and Winter (end of the year), but we are currently negotiating several contracts, and cannot offer

firm details on these books until the contracts are completed. Look for more news soon!

The Limited Edition of our first title, Ed Gorman's *Prisoners & Other Stories*, went out-of-print in just one week, and *The Definitive Best of The Horror Show* Limited Edition did the same in only one month. So we think *CD* hardcovers have a bright future indeed, not only as fine reading volumes, but also as deluxe editions for the collectors. We've had a great time working with the new bookline, and we sincerely hope you are as excited about reading and collecting *CD* hardcovers as we are about publishing them.

◆ ◆ ◆

IMPORTANT REMINDER: Writing is a lonely business, folks. So, if you really enjoy or dislike something you read in this magazine, please drop that particular author(s) a note or a letter telling him/her so. If the address is not included within the specific column, or if you are responding to a story, just send your comments to:

Cemetery Dance
c/o Author's Name
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Edgewood, MD 21040

I promise to forward all letters immediately. I can't begin to tell you how much all of *CD*'s writers appreciate your feedback. Thanks.

◆ ◆ ◆

That's all for now. Thanks for taking a look at this Winter Issue of *CD*. We think (hope) you'll enjoy it! And please remember that Ingram Periodicals is *Cemetery Dance*'s bookstore distributor. If you frequent a chain store — yes, any chain store — or an independent book or comic store, please ask the manager to order *Cemetery Dance*. Thanks — we appreciate your help!

Now turn up the lights, flip the page, and start the dance . . .

HOPE

STEVE BEVAN

STEVE BEVAN is a promising new talent from Tallahassee, Florida. A computer programmer by day, he has been writing for only a few years, and the following tale of terror marks his first sale.

A man can always hope, can't he? Sure he can. But what he hopes *for*, now that's another question altogether. You spend enough time alone, you begin to hope for things you'd always taken for granted. Like the sight of a human face, for one thing. Or the sound of a human voice, the soft touch of a woman's hand. You might do anything for these simple gifts.

It was just last night that I was standing outside the grass and dirt walls of my one-room soddie and staring across the Dakota prairie. I think God was tired on the day he made the prairie. There's just mile after mile of emptiness. Nothing. The sight of all that grass stretching to the sky is downright terrifying to some, if you're not used to it. I've heard of folks driven mad by too much open sky.

I was watching the clouds. The sun was going down and they started to blow in from the north, swollen things that made me think of black blood boiling in the sky. Mottie — that's my ox — started to wailing in the barn. It was going to be a bad storm, so I made sure the barn doors were closed up good and tight. Then I loaded the wheelbarrow with buffalo chips for the fire. As I pushed the barrow across the yard back to the soddie, a cold wind began blowing. At first, it made a low moan, like the sound of someone crying from far away. Sometimes I swear I can hear voices on that bitter wind.

Before I had even closed and barred the door, the first of the rain started falling and it pounded the sod roof like hundreds of fists. I sat in my rocker by the stove and turned up the lantern. Aside from a table for eating, a bed in the back corner, and a bench by the stove for cooking, my home was empty. That's pretty much the way I felt — empty. I had just started reading my verses in the book of Numbers when I heard the knocking on the door.

Now that was strange. I'd seen no one headed my way, no one for miles in any direction. On the prairie

a man can look out into those grasses that roll like swells on the ocean and see farther than he cares to see. Sometimes you figure you'd be better off not knowing who or what's coming your way. I've often wondered if I'll see, on the day I die, the grim reaper plodding along the horizon half an hour before he calls for me. I reckon I could've missed a man on horseback in the storm. But my eyes are sharp and I reckon it would be just as likely for a man to have sprung up out of the dirt.

I'm not one to turn away a traveler, especially in the midst of a storm. And like I said, loneliness takes its toll. I unbarred the door and let the wind push it open. Night had painted the prairie as black as the heart of the devil. The icy rain slapped against my cheeks, stinging my skin. I held the lantern out in front of me. There was no one there. All I could see was the light bouncing off the sheets of rain, the rain turning the earth to mud. And I could hear and feel the bite of the cold wind, its roar carrying those whispering voices that rose and fell like a distant crowd.

"Who's out there?" I yelled over the howling storm.

No one answered. I started wondering if I should have brought my rifle to the door.

"Last chance! Anyone out there?"

After a few long seconds I turned back inside to set down the lantern and bar the door. But something about the walls of my soddie stopped me. I swear in God's name I saw those dried sod walls that're twenty inches thick and had seen two Dakota winters and more rain and tornadoes than any wooden house could withstand, turning to mud before my eyes. What's worse is, the mud was moving, like it was filled with living things, squirming and sliding just below the surface of the muck.

"Hello?" a female voice called out.

I spun around, nearly dropping my lantern. A woman and a small child were huddled together out in the rain.

"Can you help us?" the woman asked, wiping the rain from her eyes. "It's just my daughter and me. We

were caught in the storm."

It had been so long since I'd heard a woman's voice, I don't think I've ever heard a sweeter sound. I stood there like an idiot, gaping at the two of them. It didn't occur to me at the time why a woman and her child were traveling alone, without so much as a blanket between them. I was thankful for the company.

"Come on in," I said. "Dry yourselves."

As they passed through my door, I could smell the dirt of the prairie on their dresses and in their hair. It was the same scent I'd smelled on myself last spring when I'd been digging the well. I closed and barred the door.

I'd forgotten about the walls, you understand. When I looked this time, they were as dry as dust. I scratched my head. It must have been the lantern, I figured. Lantern light's strange sometimes, makes shadows do odd things.

Looking back now I think about the odd things the mind can do, the things you make yourself believe. It's a sad state when you can't trust yourself. It makes you feel like your mind is just an old, broken wagon being led in circles by a blind horse. What's a man if he's lost his mind?

"My name's John Christian," I said, smoothing my tangled hair.

"I'm Ella," the woman said. Her face was plain but pretty, the kind of woman a man might take for his wife. She wore a simple gray dress that was well suited for farm work. "This is my daughter Daisy."

"Pleased to know you, Miss Ella. How are you Daisy?"

The child looked up at me with huge, dark eyes. Both women were dripping wet and skinny to the point of death. I could tell they'd seen hard times. That's not unusual on the Dakota prairie, but it still tugs at your heart to see a child and her mother go hungry.

I strung a rope in the corner where the bed is and hung a sheet from it to give the ladies some privacy while they changed. I gave them a couple of my old nightshirts to put on until their dresses dried. Meanwhile, I dropped a few more chips into the stove to beat back the cold. I wished I could've cleaned myself up; there's something about having a woman around that makes a man suddenly realize he hasn't had a bath in a couple of weeks. Before too long we were sitting in front of the fireplace, me on the packed earth floor, Miss Ella in the rocker, and the child on a stool between us.

"You live alone, do you, Mr. Christian?" Miss Ella asked.

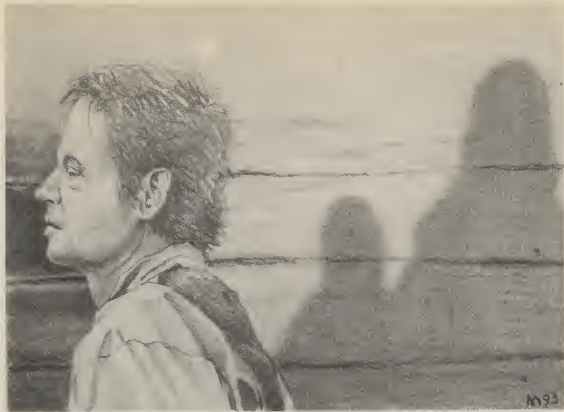
"Please, call me John. Can I offer you two some dinner? I've just some stew. It's not much, but the meat is fresh and it's hot and filling."

"We've already eaten, haven't we Daisy?"

The child nodded solemnly.



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"Yeah, I live alone," I said to answer her question. "Came out here two years ago this June. Water's scarce but the land is good."

"You've a fine home, John," she said. "Solid walls and a dry floor. My husband built such a place and it's a comfort in a storm."

"Where is your husband, Miss Ella, if you don't mind my asking?"

A shadow passed over her face. Or it could have been the flicker of the flame in the lantern. Lantern light is tricky, as I've said.

"He's an evil man," she said. "Pray you don't cross his path. If he's not dead already, he should be. Shouldn't he, Daisy?"

"Why?" I asked. "What did he do? Gambling? Drink too much?"

"Nothing quite so harmless," she said in a low voice. "It was this past winter. The snow was heavy. I don't have to tell you that. Do I, John?"

I shook my head. The snow had been terribly heavy during the two winters I'd spent in this part of Dakota.

"Food was scarce. We first had to slay the milk cow for the meat. And—"

Just then the little girl, Daisy, started to cry. It wasn't a loud cry, like healthy children are known to make to get attention. It was just a few quiet sniffles and a whole lot of tears. And somehow that made her

crying all the worse.

"You'll have to excuse Daisy," the mother said, making no move to comfort her daughter. "The memory is still fresh and it hurts her to remember."

"I understand. No need to go on."

Just then, I heard the wind pick up outside. It made a hollow cry as it whipped around the house. It sounded almost like a train whistle you might hear from miles away, a lonely sound that leaves you a little cold inside.

I was glad to have company on such a terrible night. And I was eager for more conversation. But I could see in the deep lines on Miss Ella's face that rest was what she wanted and needed. I let them bundle up together on the only bed in the rear corner. It was big enough for three, but I knew it wouldn't be proper. So, I wrapped myself with a blanket and curled up in front of the fading fire in the stove. Sleep came quickly and I remember drifting off to the haunting sound of the wind howling, an almost human sound that held hints of whispered words.

I don't know what it was that woke me. There's something about being stared at that just doesn't sit right with most folks, and that includes me. I remember sitting up straight. The soddie was filled with a reddish glow from the dying embers in the stove, a light

that was just dim enough to fill the shadows with more shadows and make you see more than was actually there. I turned around to look in the direction of the bed and that's when my heart started thudding in my chest.

Miss Ella and the child were standing by the foot of the bed. They were holding each other's hands and looking at me. It was their faces that set my heart to racing. Their skin was as white and smooth as bleached bones and they just stared at me. I don't know how else to say it, but that they *stared*. It was horrible. All I wanted was for their faces to be gone from my sight, to be free from their relentless and accusing eyes.

And then they started moving. Still staring at me, they reached down and began lifting their nightshirts. What I saw were deathly white bones where their flesh should have been. Bits of tendon and dried blood stained the perfect whiteness of their skeletons and I could see where a heavy knife had scarred the bone while cleaving away the muscle.

I think I screamed then. I'm not sure. As I said, the mind is not always a perfect thing. It doesn't always remember events exactly as they happened, if you know what I mean.

What I remember next are the sounds in the walls, the sound of mud stirring, of earth moving. I looked just in time to see the figures of Ella and Daisy disappear into the sheet of churning mud, returning back to the same earth that spawned their likenesses. Or perhaps they returned back to the corner of my mind

that created them. I don't know anymore. I only know they are gone, if indeed they ever were here.

I found the knife this morning. It was buried under the bed, beneath a few inches of dirt. The blood is still on the blade. The meat that has kept me alive these past few weeks is no longer fresh. Like my brain, the worms have done their work and the rotting has progressed too far for it to be of any use.

What's left of my wife and daughter are buried back behind the barn. I can almost remember having a wife and a daughter. But it's hard to know anymore. I'm not sure what's real and what's dreamed.

I know it gets cold in the Dakota winters, and a man can get hungry. Maybe I had to kill them. Maybe.

A man can always hope. My hope is to be with my Ella and my daughter Daisy before this night is through. I'm ready to face the Lord and account for what I've done. What else is there for a man, except to admit what he's done and ask for forgiveness? Is there forgiveness for what I've done?

The wind is blowing now. Can you hear it? It's the sound of the wind whistling through the bones of the dead. And I can hear the whispers carried on that wind and they're telling me that they are coming. Soon the slithering noises in the walls will begin, the sound of bodies moving in the mud, the sound of the earth coming to greet me.

A man can always hope.

— CD



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Greetings from **THE TIME TUNNEL**

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THE FLOOD

JOHN MACLAY

JOHN MACLAY has appeared in most of the genre's major anthologies and magazines, and his short fiction has been collected in two wonderful collections — *Other Engagements* and *Mindwarps*. "The Flood" appeared as the final story in his debut collection (six years ago), and its chilling images still haunt me today.

... Floods remembered: the farm where he was born, the house in the bend of the road, the bend of the stream, the rain starting the night before, then falling steadily all day, the stream filling its banks, the water moving faster, then rushing, then creeping out over the field, the road, until the whole valley was a churning muddy river, the house and its yard a tiny island, then the water creeping farther up, up...

He awoke suddenly to the sound of raging wind. "You'd better get out of bed, Jim."

Meryl's voice was pleasant but firm. He rolled over, bleary eyes passing his wife's fully-dressed image, then settling on the digital clock on the bed table. 8 (blinking colon) 05. Two hours earlier than she usually woke him, these past few years after the kids had gone and he'd taken early retirement, really become the night person he'd always tended to be. "You take the day watch," Jim's sleepy mind remembered joking to Meryl, "and I'll cover the night. That way, no burglars or rats'll come near this creaky old Maryland house." But there was a reason, he also sensed as he moved his legs over the side of the bed, sat upright, for his wife's unusual action.

Yes, he thought, fully awake, hearing it sweep through the invisibly-groaning trees outside the shaded windows, rattle the panes themselves. *The wind. The hurricane.*

Jim remembered, now, the night before: the soft chair in his study, the late-season Orioles game on the West Coast he'd followed on the radio from its tenth-inning start to its twelfth-inning victory four hours later. The broadcast had been punctuated by static, and interrupted several times by weather bulletins from the Baltimore station. And all the time, the wind had grown stronger.

"What's the latest?" he asked Meryl.

"Well, they still say we're going to get it. There's already a lot of rain. And that big dead limb on the maple tree, the one you were going to cut—that's down in the yard. I put the car in the garage."

"Mmmm..." his grunted reply; then the lights went off in the shaded bedroom. Jim got to his feet, walked over, raised the blind.

He could see right away where the wires were down; they lay sparking on the sidewalk, under a thick limb from the oak. The rest of the tall tree was bending with the wind more than he'd thought possible, and the shrubbery below was laid out almost flat to the ground. He looked across the street, could hardly see the other houses through the gray sheets of rain. But it was the street which really drew his attention. It was full of muddy water, flowing, rising...

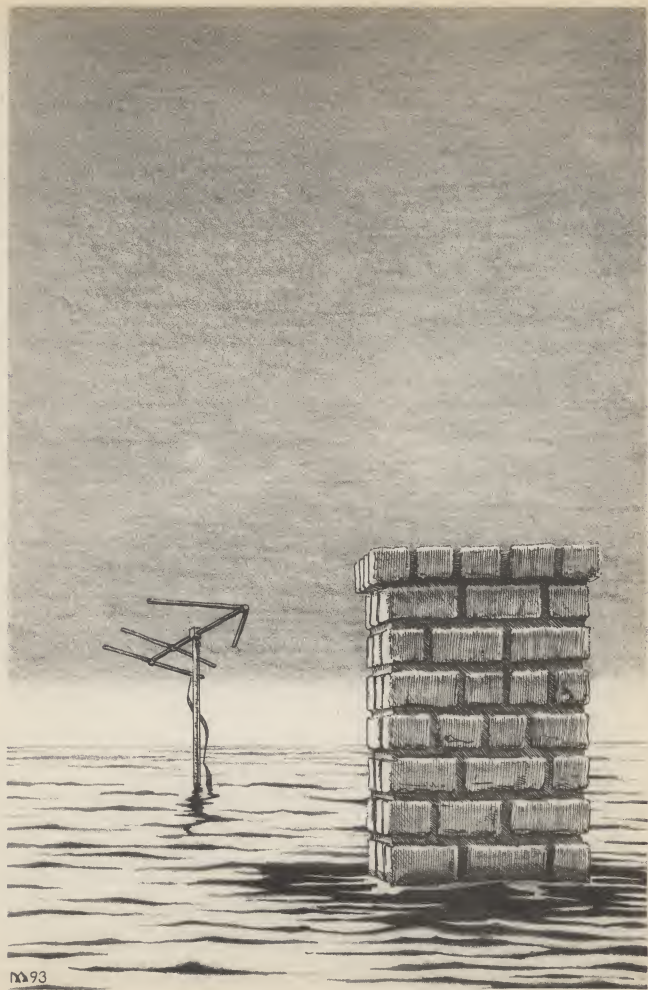
Like the stream at home, he thought, suddenly wary. *The flood.*

An hour later, when Jim sat fully dressed with Meryl in the kitchen, finishing the breakfast she'd fixed on the old gas burner in the basement, the wind was gone. "Just caught the edge of it," the authoritative voice on the portable radio was saying. "But Hurricane Jerry's moving slowly—look for heavy rain into tomorrow."

"Well, I guess we were lucky," Meryl said. "Only some limbs down, and some bushes to tie up. You can use your new saw. And I've got plenty of candles for tonight."

"Yes." But as he glanced around the dark still room, saw the rain falling, falling beyond the curtain, flowing down the large windowpanes, he remained ill at ease. Perhaps, he thought, it was the fact that he was up early with little sleep, or that he'd eaten the unaccustomed breakfast; he'd normally have waited until lunch. Or maybe it was the low pressure, the unusual quality of the hurricane air. But more than all of these, Jim decided at length, it could have been something deep in his unconscious—the dream, the childhood memories, the water...

And an hour after that, his worry was palpable; real.



"Honey, come *here*," he called from where he stood, looking out, at the front door.

"What is it?" Meryl answered, joining him, following his eyes.

"Look . . . it's . . . out of the street. Up over the lawn."

She touched his shoulder, saw with him the brown water covering the grass, licking the bottom step of the low porch, seeming to rise inexorably even as they watched.

"I'd better check the basement," Jim said, turning away. "It's got to be in the window wells by now. I'm worried about the furnace, the hot water heater."

"Whatever you think," she replied.

But a minute later, he was back.

"Strange," he said weakly. "It's not . . . coming in. The wells are full — look like fish tanks through the glass — but it's not . . . coming in."

Meryl smiled. "Must be the new windows you put in last year. You said they'd be tight." Then she looked genuinely concerned. "But please — don't worry. You know you shouldn't, at your age, with your heart."

"All right."

He went into the living room, pulled a chair over to a window for some light, started a novel he'd picked up at the library the day before. Vonnegut — about people becoming sea creatures — about . . .

. . . And an hour later, when his waking thoughts came back to him, he wasn't worried — because he knew, somehow, that it was already too late.

"Jim . . ." It was Meryl, coming downstairs. "I was reading too, but I got up to stretch, and . . . looked outside. And . . ."

He turned his head and saw it.

The water, brownish but clear enough to see through for a distance of perhaps two feet, was above the windowsill, fully three feet above the level of the porch. And yet — he glanced instinctively at his feet — the floor of the living room, the Oriental rug, were perfectly dry.

"Not . . ." he repeated sickly, knowingly, "coming in."

"No," his wife replied, and from the look on her face, he knew it was she, now, who was concerned. "But — it must be because the windows are tight."

"No," he echoed; he just couldn't comfort her. "These are as loose as everything else on this creaky old house. Remember the heating bills? The smallest breath of air shoots right through."

Meryl shook her head . . . started to cry. "Well, then, I guess you were right, darn you with all your worry. We're finally in trouble. We're in a *flood*. But Jim . . ."

"Yes?" he replied, perfectly sanguine.

"Darn it, Jim, don't you see, there's something about it that's *not right*. Not like the stories on T.V. —

where you go upstairs, wait for boats . . ."

"I *do* see," he answered, as if from far away; his tone made her angry now, made her throw up her hands in exasperation, walk out of the room.

Far away.

. . . His mind, as he sat there, took him back to the dream, to the floods of childhood. *God*, he thought, pushing himself to realize why he'd become so accepting of the weird day, the flood that didn't . . . come in.

And realizing what it was he'd accepted.

. . . Childhood memories, childhood fears, childhood *myths* that never leave you, that in always being there in your unconscious are much stronger, a hundred times stronger, than the daylight life, the piling up of meaningless years, and given the improbable but always possible right combination of dreaming mind, thoughts, and atypical nature, can rush back *like* the flood itself, the flow of your thoughts, and sweep away the years, the daylight, even the whole natural order of things, and become, as you sit in the gray, newborn, *reborn* mythical world of this house, watching the brown water rise to the top of the window, forever and again enclosing you in the protean, embryonic *sea* in which you began, *will* begin, *can rush back and become* . . .

. . . the reality . . .

And suddenly, finally, he simply didn't care; forever forgot the part-life of tree limbs and cellar windows, his daylight worries, worldly fear.

"Meryl!" he called, galvanized.

She reappeared, face composed, tears gone now; regarding him with the look that, through decades of marriage, he'd come to expect.

"I wonder . . ." She didn't say it; his mind put the words in her mouth, ". . . what you'll do next?"

She's of the daylight, he thought. *And I am of the night, the flood.*

" . . . *The house, moving beneath the water.*" Jim spoke slowly, meeting his wife's eyes. And for the first time in his years with her, he simply let his words fall, also not caring whether she understood, whether he had to make her understand, at all. " . . . *But the people in it . . . the little boy . . . will not drown.*" He smiled. "Because that's the way it is — in the dream." He paused.

"The rest . . . of the dream."

She looked at him; wondered. Then humored him — as he, Jim reflected, was determined to do with her. Because he knew exactly what she'd do.

"Honey, I tried the phone, but it's out, too. And even the *radio*." — Meryl, ten minutes later, returning to his chair.

"They would be," he answered dreamily.

"And the neighbors." — A few minutes after that.

"I couldn't even see the other houses, for the mist.

And Jim . . .

"Yes?" *There are no neighbors*, he thought.

"There's the water, too. It's up to the other windows now — the *second floor* . . ."

"*Can't get out*," he mumbled, reading her mind. *Even if one wanted to*, his own mind added. "*Drown . . . if we don't . . . keep closed*." *Not only the house*, he thought. *Our only salvation, now, is to stay inside the dream. And perhaps . . . it always was.*

Defeated, she sank into a chair beside him.

The rest of the day they sat there, not speaking, watching the brown water beyond the glass. It had motion, they noticed, despite its depth; from time to time a branch would pass by, or a tangle of uprooted grass, twisting and weaving like something alive. And they sensed, too, that it was still *rising* — improbably, mystically, higher; above any windows, any roofs. Then slowly, imperceptibly, the water grew darker, then black, until the whole world inside and out was invisible, and Jim and Meryl could not even see each

other.

It was then that he started to feel it.

"*It's happening*." He spoke slowly through the dark, keeping his voice even, but feeling an excitement, a wonder, he hoped she might finally share. Something he'd approached, while she slept, in the night.

"Yes," she answered. And he knew his life was complete.

He rose now, groping for her, gently raising her to her feet, embracing her. And at that moment, as her woman's soul rushed forth to him — comforting, *understanding* — he felt his aging heart give out.

And felt the house, at last, gently rise from its foundations . . . start its voyage, forever, beneath the protean seas
...

Back . . . back . . . to the other house.

The one in the bend of the stream . . . where it all would begin again.

— CD



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RAMBLINGS FROM THE DARK #18

On Bram Stoker, Christopher Lee, John Cleese, And A Growing Plague Of Blood-Sucking Sweeties Who Are Only Misunderstood Dead Guys:

A couple of weeks ago, I actually left the safety of my living room and ventured into the outside world. More than that, Kathy and I went to a movie theater where, after some months of anticipation, we saw the latest Hollywood incarnation of *Dracula*. Having read some articles ahead of time, I was prepared for (and anxious to see) the old-fashioned, done-on-a-soundstage look, I was prepared for (and resigned to) the dubious acting abilities of the (mostly) young cast, and I was prepared to watch some neat-o, peachy keen special effects done without the aid of state-of-the-art computer programs.

What I eventually got really ticked me off.

Its look reminded me of the best of the historically set Hammer films, and the fact that Keneau Reeves can't act his way out of a wet paper bag did not detract from my enjoyment of Winona Ryder yet again proving that she can't really act her way out of a damp paper bag — she should have quit with *Heathers*, but then what do I know. Hopkins was, to my perverted mind, perfectly over the top as Van Helsing (whom I've never liked anyway, either in print or on film),

and Gary Elwes was, as usual, wasted, in a part neither the writer nor the director seemed to know what to do with. There are others, but why bother.

Halfway through the film, however, Kathy was looking at her watch, and I was growing increasingly annoyed. Then irritated. Then thoroughly disgruntled (more so, I hasten to add, than my usual state).

The reason is simple: this may have been Francis Ford Coppola's *Dracula*, but it was most definitely not *Dracula*.

Even now, as I write this, my temper begins to fray, my eyes narrow, and I find myself harking back to a short piece I wrote as an afterword for the last of the Oxrun Station historical novels published by Don Grant and Berkley, in which I lamented the loss of the "good old days" when monsters were monsters, victims were victims, heroes were heroes, and nobody was confused as to which was which.

We are, I said, psychoanalyzing our monsters, not to death, but to extinction because of our increasing refusal to believe in the fundamental existence of Evil in ourselves.

This film, which I had hoped would prove me wrong, only served to sadden me.

Come with me now, for just a paragraph or two, to John Cleese and Michael Palin, two of my favor-

ite British comedy actors. When they were a part of Monty Python's Flying Circus, they did a routine which has since become a classic — "The Dead Parrot Sketch." For those unfamiliar with it, allow me to say no more than this: Cleese has purchased a parrot from Palin's pet shop. Cleese returns the parrot. The parrot is dead. Palin attempts to deny the demise of said parrot. When, at one point, Cleese points out that the parrot is not only silent but reclining on the bottom of the cage and not moving a muscle, Palin quickly informs him that the parrot isn't dead, he's merely "pining for the fields."

Well, so is this goddamn *Dracula*.

What's worse, this *Dracula* is purportedly not just any *Dracula*, mind you, not a mere descendant of other cinematic or stage *Draculas*, but the one, the only, the authentic Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.

In the incredibly self-serving and pious introduction to the (get this) novelization of the film (which, of course, is based on a novel which is not a novelization but a novel), the screenwriter, a Mr. James Hart, claimed to have done some extensive research into the historical *Dracula*, learned stuff no one has ever learned before, and integrated it into the Bram Stoker *Dracula* character.

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fictional, Dracula do throughout most of the film?

He pines for the fields.

The fields, in this case, being the person of Miss Mina Harker, who just happens to be a dead ringer (as it were) for Dracula's dead wife, who just happened to have tossed herself theatrically off a balcony when she supposedly (and erroneously) learned that her dear sweet Christian warrior Prince of a husband had been killed on the field of battle. So naturally, in a reunion (if you can have a reunion with a corpse) scene frighteningly reminiscent of really awful productions of *Romeo and Juliet*, Dracula renounces God, the Church, and Life itself, stabs a cross, becomes a vampire, and spends the next zillion years or so drinking the blood of young people, old people, people in between, tourists, and villagers whilst . . .

pinning for the fields.

This, of course, is the 90s. It

is a time when we routinely refuse to accept responsibility for just about anything but the good stuff; when we are supposed to "understand" that bad people aren't really bad, just misunderstood; when monsters are not real in the supernatural sense, and human monsters are either insane or aberrations of the norm since we are all, are we not, ordinarily loving and kind and gentle and caring creatures.

The Devil made me do it, as Geraldine (Flip Wilson) used to say.

Therefore, I probably ought not to have been very surprised to discover that the 90s Dracula has been vampirized himself — of Evil. Sure, he's a bad guy, but he really loves his wife and only wants her back with him so he can spend the rest of his unnatural existence sucking blood with her at his side.

Nice work if you can get it.

So this is Hart's Dracula.

It is not Stoker's Dracula.

Dracula, our fictional character, is a vampire. He is dead. He is, specifically, Undead. And he is Evil. Really Evil. He does not, in any sense of the phrase, pine for the fields. As the film notes, in several instances where dialogue has been quite nicely adapted from the book, he leaves his homeland for London because of the "humanity" — as in, "humans." An expansion of territory, as it were.

He is not a Nice Man.

He presents his three wives with a baby for dinner; he leaves Harker behind for dessert; he destroys Renfield in more ways than one; he sneers as only a nobleman can at the pathetic resistance the mortals put up when faced with his power, with his violence, with his . . . Evil.

A lot has been written and argued about concerning Dracula's seductive nature. It has been said (and admittedly, this is a

simplification) that since the book is a Victorian novel, Dracula's attraction to the opposite sex (in fiction and reality) can easily be explained in terms of his forbidden eroticism and his coiled sexuality.

But it isn't just that.

It is, I believe, that exotic sexuality combined with the seduction of Evil.

In that sense, the character of Dracula as embodied in the early performances of Christopher Lee is about as close as you can get to Stoker's "real" Dracula. Lee did not, under any circumstances, pine for the fields. He was aristocratic, aloof, cold, and, yes, damnit, Evil. Close your eyes for a moment (but only after you read this sentence, or it kind of defeats the whole purpose of the exercise) and, if you've seen this new film, now go through it and imagine that younger Christopher Lee in the title role, saying not the lines written by Mr. Hart, but the lines written by Mr. Stoker; behaving not as Mr. Hart would have Dracula behave, but as Mr. Stoker had him behave.

That, I submit, is the real Dracula.

What's even more frustrating is that there were occasional and wonderful flashes of the real Dracula there, instances of sub-

stance and style in the early going that had me excited for what I thought was to come: Dracula licking Harker's blood from the razor, Dracula's shadow moving independently of Dracula, Dracula's eyes (the first time) in the darkening sky, Dracula presenting the baby to his three wives . . . the wolves, the snow, the wind, the castle.

But then there was the interminable, extremely boring, extremely hamhanded and decidedly non-erotic love scene smack dab in the middle of this film, which was when Kathy looked at her watch and I began squirming. Especially that eye-rolling nonsense when Dracula has to contort awkwardly around to face the camera so we can see his contact lenses change and his fangs grow, all before he makes his move on Mina and then . . . then . . . (give me strength) . . . *he pulls away because he cannot do it!* Because he is, at heart (and at Hart), a really nice guy who just happens to commit mass and serial murder now and then.

He wept.

I screamed (very silently, of course, but I did scream).

So what happened here?

With only a brief time left to my allotment, I would submit to

you something I will expand upon later: that our damn near obsessive preoccupation with trying to understand that which is perfectly understandable — i.e., the evil which is a part of being human no matter how finely you slice it — has turned us, in part, into a society of rabbits.

We are afraid, perhaps even literally so, to admit the existence of Evil as a real force in our lives. Not a supernatural force necessarily, and not necessarily as an actual entity in opposition to God.

A force that is, as I said above, a part of every human being's character; it always has been, and it always will be.

We simply do not want to acknowledge it. Therefore, we explain away its occurrences as being "abnormal." Therefore, no one, human or otherwise, can possibly exist if he is, simply, Evil. Therefore, Dracula must have had some redeeming qualities, because if he didn't, we no longer have the capacity to deal with him.

We don't understand him.

Therefore, he can't exist.

Therefore, the best we can do these days is send him into the cold, cruel world . . .

Pining for the fields.

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ED
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Back in my high school days, at the time when Buddy Holly was working his way toward Iowa and his early death, a kid I knew dropped out of junior year and took off for San Francisco to become (he said) a "beatnik."

Well, he didn't last long, six months at the outside. But one sunny May morning he wheeled his VW bug into our school parking lot and opened the trunk (which was, to our eternal fascination, in the front) to reveal the most overwhelming collection of beat writing that I, as an Iowa lad, had ever seen.

Kerouac, of course. But also Ginsberg, Rexroth, Wm. Burroughs, Corso, Snyder. All of them in great gaudy editions that bespoke the darkest kind of contraband. Remember the Ferlinghetti image of a bird partaking of sperm that a lover had shot on a rock while pulling out of his girlfriend?

And Ted let us partake. He charged us cover price for what we saw. He made no money but he was that kind of kid. He liked to share.

He was just one more outsider in our little group of outsiders, a 1960 admixture of self-proclaimed writers, mulattoes, probably one genuine pervert, alcoholics and marijuana users and the kind of angry disenfranchised small-time thieves that Kerouac

(through Neal Cassidy) was always writing about.

We were glad to see Ted and convinced him to come back to school in the fall. His parents, who had never seen one of their own actually get a high school diploma, were happy he had reconsidered.

He lasted three days. One noon hour he drove down to a gas station, waited till the lunch hour was over, and then called in a bomb threat.

Two thousand kids were dutifully moved out of the school onto the lawn and kept there until the fire department had determined that the alarm had been false.

A couple days later, Ted confessed. He not only got expelled, some serious legal charges were brought against him.

I recalled all this last week when I ran into Ted for the first time in twenty years. In the ensuing years he'd been shipping out on fishing boats, going through various female entanglements, and putting on beer fat.

But when he came up to me in the video rental joint, the first thing he said was, "Hey, did you see that new edition of *On The Road*?"

Blue collar intellectuals had their greatest speaker in the late Eric Hoffer. He was a windbag sometimes but he was also honest and thoughtful and had a great if angry heart. He turned against the

anti-war protestors of the sixties and most of my generation never forgave him. But because I had a brother over there — and selfishly wanted to see air strikes covering him while he fought on the ground — I understood what Hoffer was railing about. Either get in all the way or get out.

Ted is in the Hoffer tradition. So were the rest of my pals in those long ago days — hardscrabble lives, a few of them serving time in reform school, a few later fated for hardtime in prison, but readers and thinkers all. Real readers and real thinkers, the way "uneducated" Colin Wilson was back in the early fifties when he wrote *The Outsider*, still the best book ever written about existentialism, including Sartre's.

A lot of middle-class people always found that incongruous, especially teachers. They'd see kids in all their snarly James Dean posturing and they'd think, what a bunch of cretins. They were always surprised when the kid in the leather jacket gave all the brightest answers to questions about Keats or Dos Passos or Baudelaire. One especially snotty teacher got very uptight when a reform school graduate patiently explained to her why James Gould Cozzens, her idea of a Great Writer, was actually a no-talent ninny.

So when Ted asked me, all

those long years later, about the new Kerouac edition, it seemed only natural that we'd start talking about books again.

He said that he was reading a lot of Philip K. Dick and Frederick Exley and Jack London and Stephen Crane and Thomas Merton and early Norman Mailer and Delmore Schwartz (whom we'd all sort of idolized for being so crazy and being so articulate about being crazy) and of course St. Jack himself, Kerouac (especially *Doctor Sax*, which Ted must have memorized by now), and a lot of American history, too, especially Richard Hoffstadter's book "Anti-Intellectualism in America," which is a hilarious and terrifying history of America's long tradition of yahhoism.

Big guy, big gut, wild Old Testament beard, hair that only Don King would know how to cut, big voice, standing in the middle of a store that trafficked mainly in action videos — people starting to look at him and hear what he was saying.

Kind of funny, actually. Here's this biker kind of guy sounding like a Sunday morning talk show and the onlookers and overhearers don't quite know what to make of him. How come he don't have a suit and tie on, sound-

ing like that?

I have a fondness for working-class intellectuals because I come from the working class. But in all my reading, I've rarely seen writers deal with such people, the exceptions being Robert Stone, Clancy Sigal, John Osborne, Harvey Swados and, in our little realm, Theodore Sturgeon in *The Dreaming Jewels* and Fritz Leiber in "The Ship Sails At Midnight."

Sturgeon first. I didn't ever meet him (as, alas, I did once drunkenly and boorishly meet Fritz Leiber back in my drinking days) and yet in some way I felt a real kinship with him because his writing was, in the best sense, modest and democratic and his stories and books and reviews were potent with the dreams and aspirations and fears of common people who were just a tad smarter than the people around them — but only smart enough to know That They Weren't Smart At All. Reread *The Dreaming Jewels* and you'll see what I mean, every oddball uncle and sad fat aunt and angry lonely kid in the frigging world seems to walk across the sage of that book . . . every one of them looking for The Secret. Just as Sturgeon himself was all his life and well unto his death looking for that same elusive Secret.

Leiber. "The Ship Sails At Midnight" is the best portrait (outside of parts of King's *Christine*) of oddball losers and intellectual pretenders I've ever come across. And I should know, having been a kid who wore black leather jackets and jeans and engineer boots that seemed to weigh twenty pounds apiece — but then went and ruined the whole thing by having an Ace Doublebook sticking out of my back pocket.

Which is just what Leiber caught so perfectly in "Ship," three would-be worldly young men in a nowhere little town, all falling in love with the same beautiful girl, all trying to woo her with their pathetic intellectual pretensions.

God, it's so right it's exhilarating, all the twists and turns and spiritual pratfalls he performs in that story. He makes you laugh out loud and then he breaks your heart and then he signs off on a note so melancholy it's like the saddest honky-tonk jukebox tune ever played on a long and rainy night.

Maybe the saddest thing to happen to America is the disappearance of the working-class intellectual. There's just the underclass now, people too poor and bitter to worry about anything but their bellies.



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A novel excerpt from SECRET STRANGERS

THOMAS TESSIER

Seen from above, the place may not exist. No single town stands out in the suburban thicket north of New York City. Ten miles away, the Empire State Building is still visible; a mere ten miles below, Westchester County is nothing but a dull smear of stagnant colors. There are brittle streaks and tainted whorls of green, but they are inundated with a foamy brown wash that will not go away. In the day it all looks like dead skin, or the scum on a pool of dead water. Better to see it at night, when the blackness is disturbed only by scattered pin-points of anemic light, when the accumulation of light creates a pale haze here and there, and the whole resembles nothing so much as a glimpse into the cold mysteries of a cloud chamber.

The particular place is Clearville, a town of about ten thousand people. It is close enough to Manhattan to be convenient but sufficiently removed to be away. It's nearest neighbors are Port Chester, White Plains, Harrison and Rye.

A couple of things.

In late September a woman committed suicide. Her name was Karen Bell and she was in her mid-thirties, a nurse in the local school system. She and her husband, David, an account executive for the Tri-State Insurance Group, had been trying for almost three years to have a baby. They saw doctors, took tests and attended counseling sessions. There was nothing physically or psychologically wrong with either of them, and they made every effort short of fertility drugs and artificial insemination.

It happened this way. One Friday evening Karen returned home, feeling ill. Her period had come again, right on schedule. She broke the news to her husband and then went to bed, intending to read magazines and watch television until she was lucky enough to fall asleep. David had planned to go out with some guys from the office that night; they were

going to watch an important ball game on the big-screen TV at a bar called the Locker Room. He offered to stay home instead, but Karen insisted that he go and have a good time.

David left the house around seven thirty and he arrived at the Locker Room, half a dozen miles away, just before midnight. In the meantime he'd been visiting his close friend, Lisa Chin, at her condominium. Lisa was bright, young, attractive in an exotic way, and a very successful real estate agent. She and David had met for the first time a few months earlier at a vacant house to settle a disputed point in a property appraisal. They took care of business, and then took a quick liking to each other — on the living room floor. Since then, they were close friends twice a week, alternating between other vacant houses in the area and Lisa's place.

As he knew he would, David caught up with some friends at the Locker Room and drank with them until nearly three in the morning. By then he was still in control, but moderately buzzed. He drove home cautiously, sticking to the side roads and avoiding the places where the police lurked. David couldn't be bothered with opening the garage door and putting his Buick away, so he left it in the driveway. As he was fumbling with his keys at the kitchen door, he realized that the car engine was still running. But that wasn't possible, because he had the keys in his hand. Then he noticed that the kitchen door was not locked.

David's mind cleared in a rush. The car idling nearby was Karen's Escort, in the garage. A thick, choking cloud of exhaust fumes billowed out around him when he opened the passenger-side door. He found her in the back seat, her face bright red but with an odd waxy look, her skin frighteningly cool. He dragged her, carried her through the breezeway and into the kitchen. He didn't know exactly how to give artificial respiration but he did his best to force air into

and out of Karen's lungs. After a few minutes it was obvious he was making no progress. David grabbed the telephone and began to scream.

A little later, as the sun was coming up, a sleepy detective named P.M. Hubbard arrived on the scene. The ambulance was about to leave with Karen Bell's dead body. Hubbard took a quick look: no bruises or scratches, no torn clothing, no sign of violence or a struggle. He conferred with Doctor Jerry Wexler, the medical examiner, and the two patrolmen on hand. They all told him that it looked like a perfectly straightforward suicide. The woman was young and good-looking and had a very nice home, but the same could be said of so many people who took their own lives these days. It was just another routine tragedy.

Hubbard studied the Escort for a few minutes. An ordinary green garden hose ran from the tailpipe, where it was snugged in place with a cotton face cloth, to the driver's window, where the gap at the top was plugged with a bath towel. Hubbard had seen precisely this arrangement at least a dozen times in the eighteen years he had been on the Clearville force.

There were no footprints in the yard around the house, no marks of forced entry at any of the doors or windows. A search of the breezeway and the interior of the house yielded nothing. There's nothing to this at all, Hubbard thought. The woman had not left a suicide note, nor did it appear that she had consumed any pills or liquor, but those things were options that some chose and some didn't.

But then there was the husband. Hubbard sat down to talk with him in the room that doubled as a den and a home office. David Bell could not accept the fact that his wife would do that to herself—and to him. Karen had not suffered from depression or any other mental problem. She had no enemies, no feuds, no broken friendships or family wars. She liked her job—she loved the kids and got along well with the staff. There was no one at all, as far as David knew, who would want to harm Karen. But, he insisted, she was not the kind of person who would even think of suicide; it simply wasn't in her nature. She'd never even made a single previous attempt on her life. Karen was life-positive.

Hubbard listened politely and nodded. He'd heard this sort of talk before. Relatives often bridled at the fact of suicide. It still had something of a stigma attached to it, and it seemed to say that they, too, had failed and were partly responsible.

The detective asked a few questions and soon learned about the Bells' desire for children and their long record of failure. In giving his account of the previous evening, David was candid about his affair with Lisa Chin, and that it wasn't his first extramarital fling. He was absolutely certain, however, that Karen had never learned about that side of his personal life.

Finally, in response to another question, he told Hubbard that Karen's life was insured for \$50,000 (David's was covered in the amount of \$100,000; he had drawn up both policies himself).

A thin smile formed on Hubbard's face. He didn't much care for David Bell. The man had a way of speaking quickly, with glib self-assurance and an air of authority. It was the mentality of a marketing pro. A couple of hours ago he had found his wife dead, and here he was calmly detailing how he'd cheated on her. He didn't seem particularly overcome with grief, although the two cops had told Hubbard that Bell was truly distraught when they arrived; maybe he had great powers of recovery.

But all that talk about how Karen Bell would never take her own life was baloney. The man was protesting too much. Hubbard coolly explained that there was no physical evidence to suggest anything but suicide. As for motive, there was the obvious fact of her period and the continuing failure to conceive a child. In addition, Karen might well have heard something about her husband's other romances; in spite of what David thought, it was in the nature of such things that she would, sooner or later. If David had been able to give Hubbard the name of just one person who might want to harm Karen, then the detective might have something to go on.

"But from what you've told me, the only person who stands to gain anything from her death is you."

Not, however, money. David Bell proved to be a very poor suspect. With a verdict of suicide there would be no insurance payoff, as Bell would have known better than most people. If he had wanted to murder his wife for profit, he would have arranged something other than an apparent suicide.

Hubbard talked to a few friends and relatives of the Bells. Karen's parents reacted to her death with stoic acceptance and had only good things to say about their son-in-law. Even those who were aware of David's infidelities were convinced that he had loved Karen and was committed to their marriage and the idea of a family. He was basically a good man who had not only never mistreated his wife but had always been loving and protective. The other women were an unfortunate sign of lingering immaturity that he was bound to grow out of in due course.

Karen Bell was buried in a pleasant corner of Saint Jerome Cemetery, not far from the Connecticut border. It is hallowed ground, for nowadays the Church is more discreet and sympathetic in the matter of suicide. The current thinking is that a person has to be pretty stressed-out, if not totally unhinged, to go that route. The ultimate forgiveness or the actual casting out into eternal darkness is better left to God. After all, who else can understand the state of mind when such things happen?

Thus the Karen Bell case, which was never really much of a case at all, soon dribbled away into nothingness.

Something else always comes along, and only a few weeks passed before P.M. Hubbard was drawn into the darkest, spookiest episode in his career to that point. It was exactly ten days before Halloween when he was assigned to investigate a complaint that had originated half a continent away, on the banks of the Mississippi River.

Mrs. Robin Potter of Red Wing, Minnesota, wanted the police to find her sister, Mrs. Nancy Brentwood of Clearville, New York. The relevant points (according to Robin) were these: Nancy and her husband, James, who owned the Shazam Auto Body Shop and the Malibu East Suntan Salon, were not getting along; Nancy suspected that James had a lucrative sideline in stolen cars, and that he used the money from that to set up Malibu East, where he fooled around with the underdressed, sexy young attendants; Nancy and the kids (there were two boys and two girls, ages ranging from five to fourteen) had planned to spend July and August visiting Robin, but they never came; Nancy and Robin sent postcards to each other regularly and talked on the phone at least once a month, but Robin hadn't heard from Nancy since June; James told Robin that Nancy had decided against the trip and was annoyed with her for some unspecified reason; every time Robin phoned, James said that Nancy didn't want to talk to her, or else she got no answer at all; James even refused to let her say hello to any of the kids; when Robin finally took the desperate measure of contacting one of Nancy's neighbors, Delia Borland, she learned that Delia and her husband Kurt hadn't seen Nancy or the kids since June, and that James had told them his marriage had broken up and Nancy had taken the kids to live in California; a subsequent telephone call to the Clearville Board of Education confirmed that the Brentwood children had all been removed from the school rolls; Robin would come east to confront James herself, but she had three kids of her own to take care of and her husband had just dumped her for a 22-year-old divorcee with no kids, so she couldn't afford the fare; besides, James scared her; Robin Potter suspected the worst.

Hubbard didn't. He'd seen plenty of similar cases and he knew that the person who contacted the police often proved to be a mischief-maker or someone with an axe to grind. There was no shortage of in-laws eager to "help" a daughter or a sister out of a marriage of which they did not approve. The wives usually chose to stay with their husbands, apparently in the belief that even a bad husband was better than none. It was not at all uncommon for them to stop talking to their

families, simply to avoid the hassle and to help preserve marital peace. In which case, file under F, for Family Feud.

On the other hand, complaints like this did sometimes turn up nasty domestic situations. When that happened the police would caution the people involved, and perhaps (depending on the cop) try to steer them to an appropriate counseling service or social program in the area. But there wasn't much to indicate violence here, the detective noted. Mrs. Potter hadn't even accused her brother-in-law of beating or otherwise abusing his wife and children.

Hubbard knew of Shazam and Malibu East, but he had never heard of James Brentwood before. The reason for that was simple. It turned out that Brentwood had no police record whatsoever. Hubbard asked some of the other cops and learned that as far as anyone knew both the auto body shop and the tanning salon were clean, legitimate business ventures. Shazam had been around for a while without ever attracting a hint of suspicion. Malibu East had opened only about six months ago and was still undergoing a certain amount of scrutiny, but so far no one had reported a parade of furtive johns slinking in and out of the place.

When he went looking for James Brentwood, Hubbard started at the tanning salon. It was a most illuminating visit, although Brentwood was not there. The staff consisted of two women. Cathy, the manageress, was middle-aged but did her best to look healthy and youthful. She smiled every time she spoke. Debbie, the "tanning attendant," was still in her early twenties but could not have been hired for her potential as a sex object. Dressed in stiff white slacks and a modest blue top, she looked more like a bored dental assistant. Neither woman had a tan.

Once Hubbard identified himself as a policeman, Cathy was only too happy to talk. She and Debbie hadn't been paid in two weeks. Brentwood hadn't been around for some time, and it was virtually impossible to get him on the telephone. Business was terrible. Cathy and Debbie were sure Malibu East would close down any day now; the only calls Cathy took were from creditors. She intended to quit if she didn't get some money by the end of the week; Debbie thought she might stay on a bit longer if she was offered the position of manageress.

The reason for Malibu East's poor showing may well have been the fact that sex was strictly *verboten*. Brentwood had laid down the law on Day One: no hanky-panky. He was convinced that all other tanning salons were just fronts for brothels. He would make money by offering the real thing. Not only would he fire any employee who violated his rule, he would report them to the police and, hopefully, have them run out of Clearville.

SECRET STRANGERS

THOMAS TESSIER

Author of RAPTURE and
FINISHING TOUCHES

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DARK HARVEST
P.O. Box 941
Arlington Heights, IL, 60006

Money may be the root of all evil – but in the community of Clearville, just far enough away from New York City to be considered a suburb – there is a far greater depravity eating at its soul. While babysitting for her neighbors, seventeen year old Heidi Luckner stumbles across photographs of an illicit sex session. She and her boyfriend decide to exploit these for their own gain, unaware of the magnitude of horror and tragedy that will result. And as they become greedier, suspicion and fear begin to corrode the heart of Clearville . . . with violence and retribution to soon follow.

James Brentwood, it seemed, was a devout follower of the Reverend Jerry Falwell, and he never missed a broadcast of The Old Time Gospel Hour. The qualities he stressed were Godliness, Cleanliness, Healthfulness and Hard Work, all of which were sure to lead to Prosperity. The only dollar Brentwood was interested in making was an honest one. Cathy had found all of this vaguely admirable, if a trifle unrealistic. Nonetheless, she'd been willing to give it a try. Unfortunately, it didn't seem to be working out. Men came, took the introductory session, and then never came back. A few women came, but only a few.

At the Shazam Auto Body Shop the story was a little more upbeat. Business was steady, a large man named Chick explained. He was in charge because Brentwood had taken a week off to attend to personal business. Chick liked working for Jim. True, the boss was one of those religious nuts, but he never shoved it down your throat. He was a fair employer and a hard worker; he didn't sit back and let others make money for him.

Lately, come to think of it, Jim had been acting kind of strange. Well, maybe not strange, but distracted. Chick thought there might be family problems, judging by the tone of voice when Jim was on the phone to Nancy and the look on his face when he hung up. But Jim didn't talk about it and Chick wasn't about to stick his nose in where it didn't belong.

Yes, Chick knew all about Malibu East. Jim had offered the staff at Shazam a discount rate, but no one had taken him up on it, probably because, knowing Jim, they knew it wasn't the kind of place where you could get your crank turned. Chick thought the tanning salon was a bum idea. That miserable bitch Cathy kept calling up, trying to get Jim on the line, and, when he wouldn't listen to her, whining to Chick about one thing after another. It was only a matter of time before Jim cut his losses and got back to serious business. That was probably what he was doing with this week off. Chick knew for a fact that Jim was in town; he'd come by the shop for a few minutes yesterday to deal with some snotty kid who refused to accept the job they'd done on the rocker panel of his Audi.

So now three of his employees had made convincing statements about James Brentwood's religious beliefs and moral fiber. Robin Potter appeared to be way off base with her allegations of stolen cars and scantily clad hookers. Hubbard left the auto body shop all but certain that he was dealing with another family feud.

The Brentwood house was located on Winslow

Street, within walking distance of downtown Clearville. It was a neighborhood that revealed its own economic history from the beginning right down to the present day. Many of the houses dated from early colonial times, and many more from that other golden age, the first decade of this century. Then there were the more recent intruders, the unattractive two- and three-family structures that began to creep in as the old money drifted away. Big homes were converted into apartments, and this area, like so many other downtown neighborhoods in the northeast, eventually touched bottom as a dumping ground for the working poor.

But all that had changed in the last ten years. For a while it had been overlooked, but Clearville was still as close to Manhattan as it had always been. A new generation with lots of new money fell in love with the place, the convenience, and the absurdly low (but not for long) real estate prices in the downtown neighborhood. Gentrification was swift and sure. The older homes were bought up and thoroughly renovated for single-family use, and the worst of the triple-deckers were simply razed to make room for smart, expensive "suburban townhouses." The upper middle class

had reclaimed its rightful place in the center of Clearville.

Hubbard knew immediately that Brentwood was one of the few remaining holdovers from the previous economic trough. Maybe he had no inclination to move, or maybe, like some, he believed that once property values had soared they would continue their upward flight indefinitely. Or maybe it was just that Brentwood's spare change had gone into Malibu East. Whatever the reason, the big Victorian house on Winslow showed years of neglect. It needed a new roof and a new paint job, for starters. The windows looked like they were the originals, no doubt drafty as hell.

Yet there was a certain mean orderliness about the place. The lawn, albeit stitched with crabgrass, had recently been cut. The leaves had been raked, the border hedges trimmed, and asters bloomed in the flowerbeds along the front walk. Aside from a group of rusted metal chairs on the porch, nothing, not even a single toy, had been left lying about. The Brentwood property was dilapidated but tidy.

Hubbard was halfway up the front walk when he noticed the face in the third floor window. When he stopped to get a better look, the face — he thought it was a man's — disappeared from view. Just like a cheap horror movie, Hubbard thought. He went up onto the porch and rang the doorbell. It was old, the kind you

James Brentwood, it seemed, was a devout follower of the Reverend Jerry Falwell, and he never missed a broadcast of The Old Time Gospel Hour.

turned sharply to make a loud grinding noise, but it still worked fine. He waited long enough for someone to come down from the top of the house, and then he gave the doorbell another hard twist. Finally Hubbard pounded on the heavy door with the heel of his fist.

"Who is it?"

The voice was so weak and distant that Hubbard almost didn't hear it. He walked back out onto the lawn and looked up. The third floor window was open now and a man's face was partially visible behind the screen.

"Mr. Brentwood?"

"You'll have to come back some other time."

"Are you James Brentwood?"

"What do you want?"

"I'd like to talk to you."

"Come back later."

"I'm here now and you're here now," Hubbard said. "So let's talk, and then I won't have to bother you later."

"I'm busy."

"It'll only take a couple of minutes. *Come on.*"

"Who are you?"

"Detective Hubbard, Clearville Police."

Brentwood continued to stare down from on high for a moment. His lips moved, but no sound reached Hubbard. Then there was some slight movement as Brentwood seemed to be reaching over his shoulder. A loud explosion suddenly ripped through the air, and James Brentwood's face flew away from him, spraying the window and screen with a shower of blood, disintegrated flesh and bits of bone. A stray drop of blood floated down, landing on the back of Hubbard's hand, the one he'd been using to shade his eyes as he looked up; later he would notice a couple more on his jacket and shirt, and in his hair.

"Holy shit."

The detective ran to his car and radioed for help. Then he raced back to the house. The front door was locked but he broke a window next to it, reached in, turned two latches and slid a bolt to gain entrance. Hubbard had his gun out, since he had no idea what to expect. He didn't even know whether Brentwood had shot himself, or if someone else had done it.

Quickly but cautiously, Hubbard climbed the stairs. The walls were covered with holy pictures and scriptural mottos, and on each landing there was a small table that had been turned into a shrine, with flowers, candles and one or more statuettes of Christ. Christ carrying the cross. Christ on the cross. As always, Christ had the soulful, long-haired look of an eternal hippie. Hubbard wondered if James Brentwood was now trying to explain things to Christ.

The third floor front room was locked. Hubbard gave one good kick and the old wood shattered, the door swinging open. The body was alone on the floor

inside, a .45 automatic still clutched in its right hand. Hubbard looked at the man's ruined head just long enough to be sure all life was gone. A wallet in the dead man's back pocket contained a driver's license and a Visa card in the name of James Brentwood. He must have reached around, held the gun to the back of his head and then squeezed the trigger. He knew what he was doing. Every year a surprising number of people, sticking to tradition, shoot themselves in the temple and accomplish nothing more than a lobotomy.

The room itself was virtually empty. The only thing that remotely resembled furniture was a thin mat on the floor; if the wrinkled sheet was any indication, Brentwood had been sleeping there recently. Also on the floor, nearby, were a Bible and a small table lamp, some candles and another makeshift shrine. A few jugs of water and eight loaves of Wonder bread were there to save Brentwood the trouble of running down to the kitchen. But the food had other uses too, Hubbard noticed: hundred of round Ritz crackers had been arranged carefully to form large crosses on the floor in every corner of the room. They were discolored with mold now. Elsewhere, piles of dirty clothes had grown like stalagmites. The air was so stuffy it seemed to lack oxygen, and the smell was a diabolical combination of rotten food, lingering farts and stale sweat. Brentwood had been nesting up there in that wretched little room for some time.

Hubbard got back down to the front porch in time to greet the arriving policemen. He briefed them and issued the standard instructions to secure the grounds, keep the gawkers at bay and the street traffic moving. Because nothing could be done for James Brentwood, the ambulance crew was told to wait outside until the rest of the house had been cleared. Then Hubbard drafted a beefy cop named Enright to accompany him inside.

The house was a typical Victorian. In its prime it must have been a golden beauty, full of lustrous hardwoods and elegant moldings, but decades of wear and indifference had tarnished it to the point of decay. The walls were scarred with minor chips and scratches, the floorboards groaned and sagged, and the best of the woodwork had been smothered with chocolate-colored paint. To Hubbard, the place seemed like a rat's warren of little boxes. There were nine rooms, not counting the one in which James Brentwood lay, and each of them was locked. None of the keys Hubbard found were of any use, so he and Enright took turns kicking open the doors. They started at the top of the house and worked their way down. They found no one, but all of the rooms were tidy, even the children's bedrooms. The only thing unusual was the religious iconography, which was present everywhere in the house, but that didn't surprise Hubbard. He also noticed the thin layer of dust in each room, which,

along with the lifeless air, meant that no one had been there for some time. Brentwood really had confined himself to the front room on the top floor.

But why? Hubbard was beginning to think that perhaps Nancy Brentwood had, after all, packed up and moved to California, taking the kids with her, and that since then her husband had withdrawn into an ascetic cocoon where he could slowly lose all his marbles. But if she'd done that, surely she would have let her family know, and according to Robin none of them had heard from Nancy in months. In the living room there were some photos of the family. They were all a bit on the plain side, but not unattractive; neat and well-scrubbed.

The cellar was deep, with stone walls and a dirt floor. It was also cluttered with tools, toys and all kinds of abandoned household junk. It looked as if everyone who had ever lived there had left something behind in the cellar. Some of the stuff would probably fetch ridiculous prices at an upstate antiques market. The two policemen made their way slowly through the clutter. There were a couple of possibilities that Hubbard did not want to come across: large shipping trunks, and a patch of floor that had recently been disturbed.

"There's a closet over here," Enright said. "Or maybe it's a cupboard."

"Oh shit." Hubbard hadn't expected that in a cellar. When he got to where Enright stood he saw that the wooden door, which had a padlock on it, was set flush with the stone wall. "That's a root cellar," he said. "A lot of old houses have them. It's a little room for keeping potatoes and apples and stuff like that through the winter. And let's hope that's all."

Enright laughed. Hubbard examined the ring of keys he'd taken from James Brentwood. None of them had worked on the rooms upstairs, but this was a shiny new padlock. The first key he tried turned out to be the right one.

"What do you know."

The door was slightly out of true, so it took an effort on Enright's part to drag it open across the dirt floor. Hubbard felt around for a switch but couldn't find one, and the feeble glow cast by the single light bulb suspended from the ceiling couldn't penetrate the root cellar.

"Shine your flashlight in there," Hubbard said.

Enright did so, and immediately screamed, "Oh Jesus Christ!" Hubbard looked at the floor first; it sloped down and away but there was nothing on it. Then his eyes moved up and he saw the feet. Two, four, six, eight, ten of them, perfectly still in the dancing light — for Enright's hand was shaking so. Hubbard took the flashlight, sent the patrolman upstairs with the news, and then gazed into the root cellar.

Their feet were black, possibly from rot, but more

likely due to lividity, the process by which a dead person's blood gives in to gravity and settles in the lowest part of the body. That would mean they'd been hung up there soon after they had died. Each body had been rolled up in a blanket and then tied tightly with rope across the chest and under the arms. Hubbard couldn't be sure, but it looked as though the ropes had been looped over spikes or hooks embedded in the wall. The hands and faces were not discolored, but they were covered with remarkably delicate wrinkles, and the skin looked soft and spongy. They looked old. Even the youngest, the girl of four, looked like a wizened old granny doll. They were wearing pajamas or nightgowns, and the bruises still visible around their throats probably told the rest of the story: one by one, they'd been strangled in their sleep.

Other cops had come down into the cellar, and they stood a deferential yard or two behind Hubbard, gasping, muttering to each other, cursing quietly. Hubbard took one more look at Nancy Brentwood and her children, hanging on the walls of the root cellar like sacks of fruit. It occurred to him then that there was no unpleasant smell. They were well preserved, considering the fact that they'd been there since the beginning of a hot summer. Hubbard felt bad that he could not recall any of the children's names from the report.

The police investigation that followed was both intensive and thorough, but it yielded no startling conclusion. The last year in the life of the James Brentwood family was reconstructed in what seemed fair detail, yet no matter how large the array of facts grew it always seemed curiously threadbare.

A few years ago James Brentwood had been accidentally brained when a jack slipped at the auto body shop. His moral rebirth took place shortly thereafter. Unfortunately, he failed in his many attempts to instill in his wife and children the religious fervor that had become such an important part of his own life. Several friends insisted that Nancy had indeed been considering separation. Kate, at fourteen the oldest child, had become particularly rebellious. In addition, Brentwood began to experience a certain financial strain. He refused to consider taking out a loan to start Malibu East because he would have had to use his house or Shazam as security, and he couldn't bring himself to put them at risk. So, while he still had mortgage payments to meet and a large family to support, every dollar he could spare went into the tanning salon. That in turn created more resentment at home.

In the end, the police and their psychiatrists fell back on one of the earliest and simplest of explanations. This was the well known ticking time-bomb

theory. James Brentwood had been one of those deeply disturbed individuals who, when faced with mounting tribulations, had exploded, and destroyed his family. Then he had malingered on earth for several months, attempting to maintain the facade of his ordinary working life while at the same time retreating into an increasingly monkish existence at home. He had answered questions about Nancy and the kids with contradictory stories that were bound to catch up with him. When detective Hubbard appeared on the front lawn (any other authority figure would have served the same purpose), James Brentwood was no longer able to put off the inevitable crash of outer reality and private delusion.

Nancy, Kate, Michael, William and Dawn Brentwood were given a remarkable funeral. Their coffins filled the center aisle at the Church of St. Paul of the Living God (Baptist). The place was packed with weeping relatives, friends and classmates, as well as neighbors, casual acquaintances, the media, the curious and other strangers. They were buried in the town cemetery, not far from the Hutchinson River Parkway.

There was no funeral for James Brentwood. His ashes were delivered to his parents in Hudson, New York, who expressed their shock and sorrow, but otherwise declined to answer questions or comment about anything to do with the tragedy.

In Clearville there was talk of establishing a scholarship fund in the name of the Brentwood children, but nothing came of it when people learned that none of them had been particularly bright students.

A few weeks later, a homeless man scavenging in the Hudson landfill announced that he had found a box containing the ashes of James Brentwood. It was immediately denied by Brentwood's parents, but there was talk that this macabre relic might be sold to someone like Michael Jackson. It was subsequently determined that the poor trashcomber had come up with used charcoal from the filter of a tropical fish aquarium.

And that was the end of what the *New York Post* called the Clearville Massacre.

Seen from below, the place is everything. It's like being at the bottom of a turbid sea full of difficult, changing shapes that cannot always be avoided. Only once in a while is it just possible to look up and see a shimmering distant surface, a kind of floating window of light. But that leads nowhere too.

— CD

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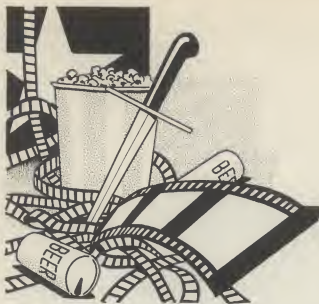
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JOE R. LANSDALE
& DAVID E. WEBB

TRASH THEATRE

SHAKES THE CLOWN

IRS MEDIA, Inc.
87 minutes.

No one was titled as the character they played, and there were guest appearances — most notably by Robin Williams as Mime Jerry. Bobcat Goldthwait plays the lead character, Shakes. Others are: Julie Brown, Paul Dooley, and Florence Henderson.

This column is being written during our office party. The party celebrates our one year anniversary at *Cemetery Dance*, and we're throwing in a Christmas party as well. So, to put it mildly, it's busy here, what with the movie running and the talking and the drinking and the eating and the stupid firecrackers.

Another problem is we hired our secretary, Bambi, as a typist because Dave and Joe aren't such great typists, and, guess what, we're having to take turns putting down the column because our erstwhile secretary has turned out to be a heavy drinker and an embarrassing devourer of Christmas rum cookies. Currently she's shucked her drawers and hiked her Mrs. Santa Claus dress and is straddling the photocopying machine, riding

it back and forth, distributing photocopies of something that looks a little like an aerial view of a hair lined Grand Canyon with a yeast infection.

Bambi is signing said photocopies as she rides and attempting to give them away, but, alas, no one here, not even Gort, and he likes raw liver, is interested in a copy, though Dave, out of politeness, has accepted one and has promised to have it framed for his office at home.

Before we get to the movie at hand, we'd like to answer a few of our letters in the mail bag while we're in the holiday spirit. Gort has just hauled these in from the warehouse, and we'd like to take this time to tell you how much we appreciate you writing us, and if you want to do more than comment, like ask our advice, we're here to help you. We'll respond to any question, no matter how stupid, if we think the question is worth responding to, and, of course, most won't be worth our time and no answer will be forthcoming.

Send photos if you like so we'll have something to snicker over.

But seriously, folks, we do appreciate your time and we'd like to

give thoughtful attention to your letters, answer them the best we know how, and we don't mind criticism either. We pride ourselves on our ability to deal with such things.

Now, let's get on to our first letter.

Dear Trash Theater:

I'm aware that your column is supposed to be satire, but I find your introduction of Bambi, your "secretary," to be offensive and chauvinistic. Hasn't this kind of humor gone out with the stone age? More humor and satire is fine, but the degradation of women isn't.

Jennifer Collins
Calten, Florida

Jennifer:

Thanks for your reply. Actually, we don't make fun of women. Just some women. In fact, we make fun of lots of stuff, like the Rue Morgue, for example. No sex organs necessarily checked. We'd make fun of you too, we had the chance.

Sincerely,
Joc and Dave

Dear Mr. Webb & Mr. Lansdale:

Don't you think your column would be funnier without all the crude language? Last time the entire column was anal. Is this your fixation?

John Clevenger
Waco, Texas

Dear John:

Blow it out your ass.

Joe and Dave

To Trash Theater:

Trash is exactly right. I read magazines to be enlightened or entertained, and your column does neither. It's juvenile, crass and gross, and I think it would be best for *Cemetery Dance* if it dropped your column from the magazine's pages.

William P. Tower
Junction, New York

Dear Bill:

Nah, nah, nuh nah nahl

Joe and Dave

Dear Joe and Dave:

What the fuck is the Rue Morgue?

Terry Truman
Nachitoches, LA

Dear Terry:

The what?

Joe and Dave

Thanks, and keep those cards and letters coming, even from all you assholes, though we prefer those who tell us we're great, like Brian Hodge who wrote to say he enjoys the column even if he has seen all the movies.

Thanks Brian.

Before we move on to the movie, we'd also like to thank Todd

C. Osborn, Mr. Know-it-All, for his comments. He pointed out to us that we ought to know that *Avenging Disco Godfather* and *Disco Godfather* are in fact the same film. Actually, we knew this, but didn't care. But thanks anyway, Todd.

We didn't know, however, that the star of this classic, Rudy Ray Moore, is featured in *The Devil's Son-in-Law*, or that Queen Bee from the Dolomite films also did party albums. We knew Moore had recorded comedy albums, but Queen Bee albums? Todd says her stuff "kicks the ass of the Dolomite albums."

He signs off, "Long live Queen Bee."

We second that, and in appreciation, Todd will be receiving the glass lid to our copier with Bambi's pap smear highly visible. Don't bother writing to thank us, Todd, it's our pleasure.

Our other letter writers will receive a framed copy of the aforementioned photocopies by Bambi, wherein the fresher copies look less like the Grand Canyon. In these, Bambi's "man in the boat" looks a little like a frustrated passenger on the *Titanic*, surrounded by a sea made up of a moth-eaten fur coat.

If this seems a bit sexist, we can have Gort's rather ugly member photocopied, or dipped in plaster, and a copy of this can be had for the asking by any of our letter writers, especially the assholes.

On to the movie and Alcoholism.

Don't say we don't cover important issues. We do. Drunks are high on our list of concerns, especially right here at the holiday season, so, that's why we've chosen this time, when the guzzling of alcohol, hair tonic and vanilla extract is at its highest, to give you a message.

Don't wear a clown suit and drink.

This Shakes guy is a fuckin'

lush. He lives in a clown's world, or town that is. A town called Palookaville. That's right. Everyone of major importance in the movie is a clown of some sort. You got your Party Clowns, your red-neck Rodeo Clowns and your Mimes. It's that kind of universe.

Our first view of Shakes has him waking up in a clown suit and smeared makeup, hung over on the floor of a bathroom while a little boy pisses in his face.

Now that's a morning bracer. Seems Shakes has spent the night fucking around, only to end up on the floor of a lady friend's toilet, clinging to the commode like it's a life preserver.

Leaving this little love nest, Shakes stops off at a filling station rest room to relieve himself, only to be told he can't have the key to the toilet. This sets Shakes off, and the clown slaps the attendant around, takes the key and takes a leak.

This accomplished, Shakes lays out his paint pots in the bathroom to the tune of McKinly Morganfield's version of "I'm A Man," and then he's off to his first clown gig of the day. A kid's birthday party.

After roughing up the father of the birthday kid, getting his money up front, Shakes shows what a real party clown can do. He brings the house down. The kids love him. He's a hit. Afterward he's off to celebrate at the Twisted Balloon, a clown bar where the clowns hang out and swap stories. They also watch a television show starring a clown called Pepe. They all hate Pepe. They're jealous of him. He's on tv and they're doing kid's birthday parties.

One of the bar's regulars is "Aunt Ester" from *Sanford and Son*, all decked out in clown uniform and grease paint. She above all hates Pepe and his show. Pepe has a little poodle and he coos to both audience and poodle during his show, of which this is the last epi-

sode. Pepe, holding his little dog, tearfully reveals he's been retired, is about to be replaced.

"Aunt Ester" responds with "Soon as that camera's off, he's gonna fuck that little dog!" and when the conversation turns to pussy, as all conversation must, even if it begins with a dog's sexual organs (now that we think about it, this began with Bambi's sexual organs — if you want to call them that), "Aunt Ester" notes the quality of her own snatch with the remark, "I got that peanut butter pussy. Smooth and brown and easy to spread."

But this isn't just a movie about pussy. (Though Shakes' two clown pals — and we're talking some seriously ugly clowns — remark that "Those television clowns get lots of pussy"). It's also a mystery. You see, Shakes, he keeps getting drunk and fucked up, and his boss, Owen Cheese, tells Shakes to get it together or get out.

If that doesn't take the nipple off the tit, there's another problem. The coveted position of Pepe's tv replacement doesn't go to Shakes, who everyone agrees deserves the job, it goes to Binky, a clown asshole. A pasty faced, bore of a clown who has two butt sucking followers, Ho-Ho and Boots.

Shakes, upset and defeated at every turn, really gets pickled now, goes for a joy ride with his buddies in their '67 Falcon convertible. They have some zany moments until they see mimes in the park, trying to get out of invisible boxes.

It sets our boys off. They respond to baser instincts, jump out of the car and participate in a bit of mime bashing while screaming at them, "You Silent Motherfuckers."

Shakes' buddies vow to keep Shakes off the sauce, to keep him from blowing his career. It doesn't work. Shakes gets deliriously drunk, scaring the holy hell out of a bunch of kids at a birthday party.

It's over for Shakes. Later,

Shakes goes to Mr. Cheese's office, and Mr. Cheese has to fire him, and Shakes, hung over and angry, threatens Cheese with his life, and passes out.

Wouldn't you know it. Shortly thereafter, Mr. Cheese wanders in on Binky, Ho-Ho and Boots and two rodeo clowns snorting white powder. Mr. Cheese, ever aware, yells, "You clowns are on dope!"

Binky flips and clubs Mr. Cheese to death with a juggling pin. The clowns panic, start to scatter, but Binky reminds them that they're all in this together. You know what's next. They frame the drunk. Shakes.

Shakes wakes up with a juggling pin in his hand, the pin covered in noggin custard, and nearby on the floor, taking a dirt nap, his brains leaking out of his head like gruel, is Mr. Cheese.

Shakes is fucked. He thinks maybe he did kill Mr. Cheese. He beats feet, jumps in his beat up Metropolitan and hauls ass, only to be run off the road by the two redneck Rodeo clowns in cahoots with Binky.

Shakes' Metropolitan jets over a cliff, and Shakes leaps free. Tough, considering Shakes has just made his last payment on it.

Shakes goes to his estranged girlfriend — estranged because she's tired of him being such an obnoxious drunk — for help. She still loves him and comes up with a plan. She makes him up as a mime, then it's off to a mime's workshop to hide out.

For Shakes, this is akin to waking up one morning to find yourself in a bestiality anal intercourse workshop with a jar of Vaseline in your hand and the hairy ass of a German Shepherd pointed your way. It's not what he had in mind.

In a cameo role, Robin Williams plays Mime Jerry, sort of the Mime Guru. He's the man who shows the mimes how to mime. Shakes is asked to come forward

and participate with Mime Jerry at the head of the class as stage helper. Shakes is asked his name, and he lies. Says it's Chuck.

Talk about looking like the fool, Chuck/Shakes is one major idiot as he portrays "frying bacon" and the amazing "donkey ride." Robin Williams, constantly directing Shakes, telling him to "shake that money maker" is in our estimation the highlight of the movie.

Meanwhile, Shakes' girlfriend is kidnapped by Binky, who has taken over Pepe's television show. You remember Pepe. He's the one "Aunt Ester" said was gonna fuck the little dog soon as the camera was off of him.

Binky, drug crazed, begins to lose it. His brain rolls to one side. He ties Shakes' girlfriend, who he renames Clown Judy, to a knife board and throws knives at her. That's right, he's gone completely nuts and is going to kill Clown Judy on his live tv show with a whole batch of kids looking on from the studio audience. He comes on singing his theme song, which is sort of like the lounge act from hell. The producer is coaxing the kids to applaud and cheer when the APPLAUSE sign lights up, but they're not all that excited. Maybe the broad clown gets a knife, they'll start to get worked up.

Binky starts to toss blades one after another, until the final toss, which we all know is in fact, THE FINAL TOSS. It looks as if Clown Judy will soon be wearing about six inches of steel for a nose.

But, just in the nick of time, Shakes shows up and tosses a juggling pin in front of Clown Judy. The pin takes the knife, and Binky is subdued.

Binky goes to jail, Shakes takes up AA, gets in good with his girlfriend, and he's the new host of the tv show, and grateful as he is, he drags his clown buddies into his act, and everyone lives happily ever after, the One Day At A Time Method.

Well, we're back.
Didn't know we were gone
did you?

The party got fucked. Joe found a turd in the onion dip, and if that wasn't bad enough, nobody would claim it, and Bambi's snake handling, fundamentalist, preacher, boyfriend, Norvil Simpkins showed up with a box of goddamn rattlers and copperheads, right at a strategic moment when Bambi was still riding the copier like it was a mechanical bull, her dress up around her waist and wearing Gort like a hat.

Norvil broke into speaking in tongues, leaping around waving his snakes, trying to get everyone to hold one. Joe and Dave went through a window. Peeking over the window sill, we saw Norvil weaving, spinning and dancing over to the copying machine while talking funny, but he made the mistake of poking a snake in Bambi's face. Gort, thinking it was an offering of some culinary delight, bit its head off.

"Ain't I told you not to come at me with them snakes, goddamn you," Bambi screamed, and drop kicked Norvil's box of precious reptiles clean across the room, spreading snakes like drained spaghetti out of a colander.

At this point the guests were beginning to thin. When a copperhead, in a state of agitation, crawled up to our window sill, we began to thin too. Last we seen of Trash Theater Central, lights were flickering, folks were screaming, and the party seemed to be drawing to a close.

Writing the last of this from Dave's house, we'd like to wish y'all a belated Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year, though we aren't in all that festive a spirit.

PRISONERS and other stories

by ED GORMAN

Afterword by Dean R. Koontz

The British magazine *Million*, devoted to the serious study of popular fiction, recently reviewed Ed Gorman's first short story collection, *PRISONERS*. Here's an excerpt from that review:

"Ed Gorman is one of that magically inventive breed of writers who concentrates on his characters...and in the slow unfolding of their lives, Gorman has them take on the three-dimensional to an extent which is superior to almost everyone else.

"Gorman writes everything: crime, suspense, westerns, horror, private eye...you name it. But while it's a creditable and even enviable achievement, his refusal to stick to any one genre could well explain why he's not more widely regarded as being one of the world's great storytellers. Which is a shame, because he is.

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Moscow, PA

"Imagine my surprise when I saw your name in this magazine. I couldn't believe it could be my Aunt Helen's son writing in *CD*."

—Patty Lamonica
Merrick NY

Before we get into the meat of things, a disclaimer: It is NOT Patty's Aunt Helen's son writing in *CD*. My mother's name is Marie and she has no niece named Patty. If there is another Thomas F. Monteleone out there related to the never-before-heard-of-Lamonica's, he is invited, if not outright *ordered*, to write in and give up his name. There is surely only room enough for one of us with that appellation. And, as usual, any and all of you are invited to write me at the usual address:

P.O. Box 5788
Baltimore MD 21208

which will be done purely for my enjoyment, amusement, and mystification. Don't expect me to answer you, although you might get a few of your miserably scrawled words at the beginning of some future column and thus achieve your small moment of notoriety before the universe grinds you up.

Now, let's get on with today's topic.

I can still remember the day I was sitting in my room, age 12, as I finished a Ballantine paperback collection of stories by Theodore Sturgeon, and suddenly realized what I wanted to do with my life. I wanted to write stories of power and imagination and sensitivity like this guy with the name of a Northern fish.

Yeah, it sounded like a great way to make a living. Be a writer. Be your own boss; don't get your hands dirty; don't schlep a lunch pail to some faceless manufacturing plant; and the rest of the familial litany . . .

Actually, my vocational aspirations at that moment of Zen-like *satori* were even more finely pointed—not only did I want to be a writer, I wanted to be a *science fiction writer*. At the age of twelve or so (before I had discovered the pleasures of a fairly new magazine of that era called *Playboy*), I believed that a science fiction writer had to be about the greatest thing there was in the known universe. I mean, these guys actually got *paid*(!) to think up bizarre, thought-provoking, and thoroughly *ingenious* stories which challenged your abilities and fired your imagination. And so, for the next ten years—albeit a brief, four year detour in college whereupon I majored in Budweiser and the Exigencies of The American Female—I honed my life to become a **Science Fiction Writer**.

As they tend to say: That was Then, This is Now

I sold my first short story (to *Amazing Stories*) in 1972. I went on to fulfill my childhood dream and—yea and verily—became a Science Fiction Writer. I did this willingly,

with the *cogitations* and the self-assuredness of youth cruising in fifth gear. I knew it was going to be just great. I did this without having much knowledge about many things, such as: the economics of publishing; the editorial philosophies of publishing companies; the demands of book-selling cartels like WaldenDalton and the faceless "book distributors;" the stigma attached to being a "category" writer or even a "paperback" writer; the consummate nerdacity of many science fiction writers; and the utter silliness of that most strange of phenomenon—SF Fandom.

Now maybe you don't know much about these things either, so maybe I'll get around to hipping you to some of the barnacles which attach themselves to the hulls of SF writers, and some of the other shit that make the lives of writers in general not always fun. The point of all this is that becoming a science fiction writer was, for me at least, not the nirvanic state I'd expected.

The payment rates for short fiction, ranging from a half cent up to *maybe* five cents per word were not going to buy you many co-ops on Park Avenue South. And even if you mastered the task of writing novels, your beginning advances wouldn't even make the down payment on an order of aluminum siding for your garage. If you beat your brains in, and cranked out at least one (but preferably two) SF novel(s) per year, and slowly captured the attention of an editor or a readership, you *might* get to the point where you could earn enough to live a meager existence. If you were lucky enough to have a wife/husband/girlfriend/boyfriend (somehow I don't think you'll ever see me using that "significant other" politically corrected bullshit) who would kick in some income to keep things functioning, and if you could get a few foreign/translation sales each year, then maybe you could almost get by with a few comforts and not be

worrying about how every freaking bill would be paid.

And then you find out about Fandom, which is a vast sea of social misfits, aptly characterized as graceless, generally overweight, rude, highly intelligent, and largely ignorant of the benefits of things such as deodorant, shampoo, toothpaste, fingernail clippers, and clean socks & underwear. To keep things as succinct as possible, SF Fandom and I found each other mutually loathsome. We both knew at an instant that we were not like beings, that we'd come from antipodal territories, that we were definitely not going to ameliorate our differences. To show you how bad it got, even though I was one of the few SF writers living in Baltimore, I was rarely even invited to participate in the local yearly convention (BaltiCon). The reason for this, if I am to believe my sources, stems from my appearance on a panel at a BaltiCon of perhaps ten years ago.

It went down like this: I was the panel's moderator, that is, I was responsible for keeping it rolling—asking questions of the other panelists, making keen observations, and coming up with some humor to prevent things from getting too godawful deadly. So the panel runs on for about a half hour, and, as panels can very easily do, it dies abruptly. Everybody has suddenly said all they care or know about the topic and nobody's saying jack-shit and I'm sitting there with the microphone in one hand and my dick in the other. So what did I do?

I tried a little humor, of course.

I said something like this: "Hey, it looks like we've run out of things to say about the topic . . . But, if the pinhead who thought up these panel ideas had done a better job, maybe we'd have more to talk about . . ."

Okay, I admit—it's not exactly Billy Crystal, but I was trying, right?

So what happens is I get a few

obligatory laughs, we skate around for another minute or so and since nobody else comes through with anything earth-shaking, I fold up the panel like a cheap accordion and get out of Dodge. What I *don't* know is the woman who conceived of the panel topics is sitting in the front row getting extremely pissed off because I referred to her as a "pinhead" for thinking up a dumb panel topic.

Yeah, can you believe it? She takes what I said *personally* instead of realizing I am doing a Sam Kinison, a Dice Clay, or for you older and less hip readers, a Don Rickles. Even now, I wonder how she could think I was attacking her intelligence or skill at thinking up ideas for panels. Christ, I didn't even know her *name* at the time.

So dig the rest of this enchanting little saga . . . Does PanelWoman approach me afterwards and tell me she's grievously offended? No.

Does she tell someone *else* to tell me? Nah.

Does she do anything other than stew in her own bilious juices?

Oh yeah . . .

What she does is make sure that whenever she has anything to do with organizing a BaltiCon, not only will I not be on any panels, but she makes sure I'm not even *invited* to the fucking convention. Petty? Small? Vena! I'd say they're all pretty accurate.

Funny thing is, it didn't bother me to be on BaltiCon's shitlist (actually, I kind of liked it . . .) because it proved to me how pea-brained these SF fans (the same ones who yammer on about sense of wonder and cosmic awareness and all that bullshit) can be, and it illustrated their pathetic attempts to be influential power-brokers. The only hassle in all this was my oldest son, Damon, who loved the BaltiCons when he was between the ages of eight and thirteen—precisely the five-year period when PanelWoman was exacting

her cruel and unusual punishment upon me. I could give a shit whether I went to the convention, but if I didn't take Damon to the masquerade, the art show, the huckster room, and the movies, he would spend the next month or so hating Dad.

So what was I to do? Take my son to BaltiCon and shell out 30 bucks apiece for membership badges?

Listen: if you're sitting there holding this magazine in your pasty hands thinking *well, gosh, I guess he's gotta pay the bastards* . . . then, friends, you don't know your Uncle Thomas too well, do you?

Damon used to count the days until he could go to BaltiCon, and for a few years there, we even spent a lot of hours in the basement designing and creating costumes for him to wear at the masquerade competition—so there was no way I was going to not take the kid to the convention.

There was *also* no way I was going to *pay* BaltiCon for the privilege of being insulted and slighted by them.

Solution: each year I would borrow a badge from a friend attending the convention (usually a writer who'd been given a free membership anyway), then make a Xerox, Wite-Out the friend's name on the copy, then make a couple copies from the altered copy, write in my name and Damon's and slip them in some old plastic badge holders. *Prest-o-Change-o!* Everybody's happy.

They think they fucked me, and I *know* I fucked them.

But I digress, don't I? Well, that's part of the fun.

The reason I mention all this about SF Fandom is merely to illustrate my point about being a science fiction writer and exposing yourself to the stuff of which masochism must be made.

Getting back to the main topic, there are other factors of which you slowly become aware as

you get more deeply mired in the SF genre. Publishing economics is a brutal slap in the face. And it usually takes two or three books before you are willing to admit that the average advance for the average SF novel will get you shelf-space and shelf-time in all the booksellers chain-stores for as long as it takes for the books to get sold (a day, a week, a month or two—it doesn't matter), and then it's *sayonara*. That is, your book is essentially *gone*, never to be seen again. And part of this is how your advance is tied into the number of copies "they" decided to print. In other words, they print enough copies to get back their advance, and that's it, friends. If your book gets "legs," as they say, and starts selling by word of mouth or the fucking President happens to mention at a press conference that he's reading it and it's great, or something else weird, hey, that's *gravy* to your publisher. They'll print more copies and rake in the bucks. But the important thing to remember here is this: **the publisher doesn't really give a wet fart for your book.** If it sells more than the minimum they've already figured on, great; if it doesn't, that's also great.

What's that?

Well, it's like this . . . The publisher sees you as "category" writer, a writer who creates filler for their almighty *List*, which is the number of monthly slots of book titles in various genres every publisher must fill to keep his sales figures steady. Every publisher has a pre-set number of romances, mysteries, "sci-fi's," westerns, etc. that must be filled by *something*. And if your book isn't the "lead" title (the one the salesmen hype and push to the chain store buyers), then it's just part of the monthly category cannon fodder.

And that's the facts, Jack.

But wait, there's more. You see, the big problem is that once you get this label as a category-writer, it's like having that dead

fucking albatross tied around your neck. It's an unspoken announcement to editors that you'll write cheap and fast, quick and dirty, and, here's the worst part, that you'll probably never get any serious consideration for your work (beyond the genre-specific audience of hardcore sky-fie, mystery, western, romance, etc. readers).

What this means is simple: as a category-writer, you will have a hell of a time ever reaching a truly cross-cultural, cross-genre, national, big-league, adult audience.

It's a tough position to be in, and when I saw it happening to me in the late seventies, I jumped ship. It wouldn't be good to be pegged as an SF writer for the next thirty years. (For what? So when I was 79 years old, they could wheel me up to the stage to get my Longevity Hugo Award?—Man, fuck that.) I eased off on the SF stuff and turned my hand at what was then *terra incognita*—the scary stuff Steve King and very few others were writing. There was no real category for it. No section in the *WaldenDaltons*. No label. No stigma. And the reason was simple. King was selling his books to *everybody*.

And that was the key back in the early eighties

I submit for your approval, friends, that back then, HDFS (Horror/Dark Fantasy/Suspense) was not a real booksellers/publishers "category." Oh it had always been around as a kind of stepchild to the mainstream, like spy-thrillers, but it was definitely not in the publisher-perceived minor leagues like bodice-rippers, whodunits, and "that Buck Rogers stuff."

And so, I felt pretty good about writing HDFS through much of the eighties. I felt very good about *not* being a member of the Science Fiction Writers of America—although it took many years before the fan press finally acknowledged I was no longer an SF

writer they never liked very much.

I also felt pretty good about the actual writing of HDFS. For me, at least, I felt like I was being allowed to concentrate more on the basic elements of fiction—characterization and plot. I felt myself maturing as a writer in the eighties, and my novels reflected a renewed confidence and freedom to explore new territory. I take pride in my HDFS of the eighties—each one is very different from all the others, and none of them are tired rereads of old bullshit. No vampires or zombies or ghosts or any of that crowd. Plus, I think I did some nice work with my characters—even if a lot of them do have Italian last names.

But, as the eighties started to wind down, I started to see some disturbing trends in the publishing world. Some low-budget houses with names like Paperjacks and Leisure and Zebra and others were starting to grind out an alarming number of HDFS books each month. And they were packaging them with the once-distinctive black background/foil lettering which rapidly became a cover-cliché. Pretty soon, there were whole sections in the WaldenDaltons overflowing with covers with creepy houses, skeletons, bloody kitchen implements, skeletons, claws ripping through various barriers, skeletons, eyes peering over or through various barriers, skeletons, and well, you can dig it . . .

What we're talking about here, friends, is a solid, readily recognizable, beat-it-the-fuck-to-death CATEGORY!

Yeah, well, a bunch of us saw it coming, and maybe it's a good thing and maybe it's not. But my feeling is it's definitely not good news. I think a lot of inferior product was flushed into the marketplace in the last four years, and the reading public has been stung more than few times buying a lot of tired, hackneyed and retrograde HDFS. And that's how the Boom turns into a Bust.

So dig—while I see all this going on, a bunch of my friends and colleagues get together and organize the Horror Writers of America, Inc. I joined in the heat of the moment and the belief that the (at that time) small crowd of us who write the stuff should have some kind of collective voice in the publishing industry. But when Dean Kootz sweet-talked me into running for Vice-President of HWA a couple years back, I remember telling him, I was a bit hesitant to assume that much of a high-profile.

Dean knew precisely what I was talking about. He'd dragged a science fiction writer anchor around with him for more than ten years and spent another five trying to hacksaw it loose so the publishers could start taking his work seriously.

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reads "By Bizarre Hands," the story of a preacher who sets out to do a good deed for a retarded girl on Halloween. On Side Two, Joe reads "Steppin' Out, Summer of 1968" — where East Texas adolescents are assaulted by lust, bad hooch, oily hair styles and angry 'gators. One of Joe's novellas won three important awards. Reviewers said, "Lansdale knows about human monsters. He writes about them with the intimate knowledge of one damned by his imagination."

NEAL BARRETT, JR.

reads "Winter on the Belle Fourche," which details a chance meeting between mountain man Liver Eatin' Johnston and Emily Dickinson. He also reads "Class of '61," the tale of a human ghost who spooks an alien race. *The Washington Post* called Barrett's 1991 novel, *The Hereafter Gang*, "one of the great American novels." His new St. Martin's mystery, *Pink Vodka Blues*, is optioned for a movie by producer David Brown.

HOWARD WALDROP

reads "French Scenes" which chronicles an extremely weird form of French "new wave" movies. "Passing of the Western" is a history of Western Movies you can't find anywhere else. Howard won both the Nebula and the World Fantasy Award for his novelette, "The Ugly Chickens." Gardner Dozois says, "Waldrop's gonzo sense of humor is magic."

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Which, thank Cthulhu (sorry about that, H.P.) they finally did. I had some genuine fears that here was a bunch of us (like Harlan, Charlie Grant, Dean, Quinn Yarbro, Dennis Etchison, and a buncha others) who just recently got out from under the science fiction labels to receive recognition from larger audiences than the propeller-beanie crowd, would be carrying out a kind of weird form of self-immolation.

Were we shedding one category skin just to be straight-jacketed into a new one?

Back then, Dean said he wasn't sure what the answer might be, but he sure needed a Vice-President, so whaddya say, Tom, old buddy?

I guess the jury's still out on this whole question. And while I don't feel the publishers treat HDFS writers as badly as some of the other categories, I think it's just a matter of time before things get equally grim. So if you're a young writer reading this and you are feeling pretty depressed about what you might be getting yourself into, try not to feel too terribly bad. Remember: I *always* make things sound better or worse than they really are. It's my job, as well as a penchant for the dramatic, I guess.

I mean, there're plenty of writers out there who have become very happy and very comfortable being category writers. They're

proud to be SF writers or PI writers or romance writers, and they're happy to know they can get the steady money if they continue to turn out a book or two a year and make a decent but never extravagant living. If that's what you want, hey, that's copacetic. You'll never hear me saying you're a pithecanthropoid for doing it—I might *think* it, and I might write it, but I'll never say it.

So what's the upshot of all this noise? Am I a horror/suspense writer? Do I want to be called one? Known as one?

Yes and no to all counts. The record will show that I've written some horror novels and plenty of stories, sure. But I would rather be known simply as a writer who happens to write some dark fantasy, some darkly imaginative stuff. My latest novel, *The Blood of the Lamb*, is not horror at all. But it has elements of SF, suspense, and even a little dark fantasy. Whatever you want to call it, the *New York Times* loved it, and it made their prestigious Notable Books of the Year List for 1992. It defies strict categorization (although some would call it a "thriller"—that catch-all label for mainstream-ish global contemporary intrigue sagas), and I think it's a good guidepost to indicate the direction in which my writing will continue to go.

I have no idea whether this is important shit to be pondering,

but it's definitely the kind of stuff that can strongly affect careers and reputations. Ask Harlan Ellison, whose work can *still* be found in the SF rack even though he's campaigned long and of course loudly to get rid of the sci-fi writer label. Ask Dean Koontz about all the years he banged his head against his keyboard writing three and four books a year just to stay above the minimum wage.

Sometimes, friends, it just ain't worth it.

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A CONVERSATION WITH CLIVE BARKER

T. LIAM McDONALD

At the beginning of his career, Clive Barker became known primarily as the leading practitioner of extreme horror. "There are no limits," the tag line to his first film, *Hellraiser*, touted, and in the six *Books of Blood*, he pushed a new form of horror to its limits. Daring, artful, stylish, and unconventional, Barker set his sights on our preconceptions and moral absolutism, picking off sacred cows one by one while building his own elaborate set of myths. He soon left straight horror behind to follow his imagination where it might lead into the realms of fantasy. But *Weaveworld*, *The Great and Secret Show* and *Imajica* were not conventional fantasies of warlocks and elves: they were roadmaps of uncharted regions of dream and imagination. The dark, grim, grand guignol elements of Barker's early works were all there, but they weren't at the forefront. Instead, he gave us a glimpse of hidden worlds and strange people . . . an exploration deep inside ourselves.

While his latest movie, *Candyman*, is true horror, in fiction he has tripped backwards to the land of his — and our — youth in *The Thief of Always: A Fable for All Ages*. Those eternal grey afternoons of childhood musings are where we meet Harvey Swick, who, like Pi-

nocchio, is led to Hood's House, where his every wish comes true. But, of course, there is a dark side: A quartet of monstrous magician's helpers named Marr, Rictus, Jive, and Carna; a fetid lake that is the dark underbelly of the House's apparent goodness; and the mysterious Hood himself, who leads children to his house to suck their youth away.

The book is quite a departure for Barker: a brief, gentle story about youth. He also did all the illustrations. *The Thief of Always* is being made into an animated film by the makers of the *Beetlejuice* cartoon series.

CEMETERY DANCE: So you finally did your *Alice in Wonderland*, your Walt Disney movie . . .

CLIVE BARKER: Whoever thought I'd do it?

CD: There seems to be a more traditional moral core inside *The Thief of Always* than we are used to seeing in Clive Barker books.

BARKER: That's true on one level, but then there's some observations that might counteract that. If this was a C.S. Lewis Narnia book, for instance, I doubt that the hero would have found himself

empowered by the fact that he had similarities with the villain. In fact, quite the reverse: I think that if Harvey was one of C.S. Lewis's characters, or indeed Alice, what he would find he had was something pure and light-like . . . something which implied a source of irreducible goodness in him. What Harvey is empowered by is that he is potentially The Sorcerer's Apprentice. I know you have to dig a bit for that, but it is there. One of the key moments, I think, in the book's process is when Harvey is with Marr and Jive up on the roof and they ask him what he wants to be, and he says "I want to be a vampire." At that point, it seems that Harvey is giving into the dark side, but in fact, in that very recognition — in the seeds of their plotting against him — comes their ultimate destruction. If Marr and Jive had not encouraged him to focus on what he actually wanted, he would not have had the power to undo the house as he does. I think that is an inversion of the conventional code. Imagine that happening in a Spielberg movie. Never! I think there's a bit of Maurice Sendak in the book: this sense that children are actually mischievous, even malicious creatures; and that the harm that they do to themselves is exceeded only

by the harm that they do to each other.

CD: There is a picture of The Child Barker in the back of the book. Is that Harvey Swick? Did *The Thief of Always* come from your childhood fantasies?

BARKER: Yes. The pursuit of the dark side is absolutely The Child Barker. The desire to be a vampire, the desire to be of the night, the desire to rise against the moon to terrify your friends is absolutely part of what I was as a child, and is part of what I am as an adult. I think the roots of any fantasist's psyche are the desire to investigate places which you know that a career in accounting wouldn't allow you to. Indulging the imagination in a bright, breezy, lively way is certainly part of the fun of the book. But it does have its dark moments: the confrontation with Lulu changed to a fish, the realization that all those clothes in the attic are from children who have come to the house and never left.

CD: So it is a bit like a Disney Movie.

BARKER: Absolutely. But the resolution of a narrative in a Disney movie would be absolutely in strict dichotomy between good and bad: the idea that good conquers bad because love is on its side.

CD: You seem to have moved a long way from many of the stories in *The Books of Blood*, into a realm where you explore religious worlds and myths more and more. Would you agree with that observation?

BARKER: Absolutely. I'm going to push this into more serious territory now. I've seen a lot of people die in the last little while. I think it's impossible to be an artist without seeing other artists die. It changes completely the way you look at life. I've just touched forty, seen people much younger than myself — completely blameless people — perish, and I think my attention has turned very much in a way maybe it wouldn't have turned quite so soon. I think it would have

turned eventually. The process was speeded up by the fact that I was watching people die and saying "What did I live for?" I've been getting some incredibly poignant letters because of the presence of a gay man with AIDS in *Imajica*, who is not pictured as a victim, but is someone who is an active participant in the narrative, and who will actually change the course of things. I've found that most horror fiction and fantasy fiction is essentially sexless, and if not sex-

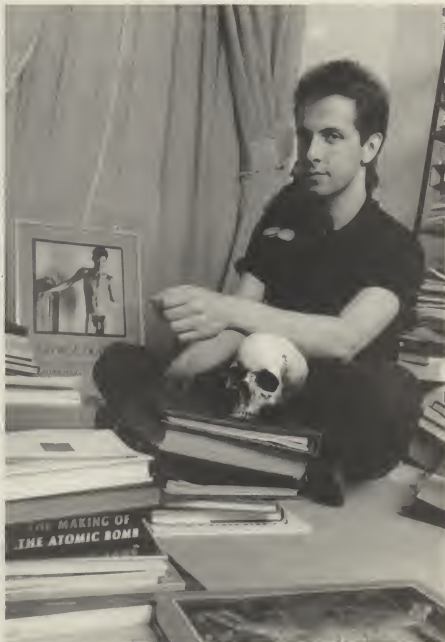


Photo Credit: Beth Gwinn

less, then the vision of sex is adolescent. My sense is that with the admission of sex, with the embracing of sexual feeling into the narrative, and every shade and every conceivable variation of sexual feeling, comes the sense that fantasy can at some point come of age. The argument which is often made against fantasy — and which I think carries some weight — is that it is often an escape from reality. You escape from the complexity of sexual exchange into a world where Hobbits procreate without ever getting to bed, and where women, by and large, are painted in such etherial terms that the possibility of having something under their “nebulous but flowing garments” is unconsidered. There seems to be a terror of sexuality. When you use the word fantasy, to me there are fantasies of power — very clearly — fantasies of transformation, and fantasies of sex. What is our fantasy life therefore if not, in some part, to feel our erotic longings?

CD: Your work more than many fantasists seems to be embracing the archetypal and mythical on a mature level. You're a right writer for the times, when we see the success of writers like Joseph Campbell, and the bubbling up of the neo-pagan movement. It's a shame Jung never lived to read your books.

BARKER: But, without being sentimental, he lives because so many of these thoughts, so much of the stuff about shamanism, for instance, would be unthinkable without his writing.

CD: There is a strong interest in these ideas — alternative religions, the value of myth — now. Do you think it's attributal to millennial panic?

BARKER: I think it is millennial panic, but I think that's only part

of it. Finally the death of God has reached the people. I wouldn't say I'm an atheist. The patterns are just too complex to go into. My great inspiration is Blake. Here is a man who believed profoundly in the divine in man, and found every way that his imagination could come up with — and there were a lot of them — to actually approach



the problem of how to reinvent God so that it made sense to him without violating his belief system. This is the man who said “Make your own laws or be a slave to another man.”

CD: And all that clashed with his strong belief in Christianity.

BARKER: Absolutely. Blake actually said of one of his enemies “Both read the Bible day and night/But thou read'st black where I read white.”

CD: Like Blake, you seem to be reinventing your whole belief system. We don't find many people like that flourishing in the arts.

BARKER: They exist, but they're hidden away. Like the artist Austen Spur. He's extraordinary, and his writings were extraordinary. He was also a crazy fuck.

CD: So was Blake.

BARKER: Exactly!

CD: What about Clive Barker?

BARKER: I can do a great impersonation of a sane man.

CD: People always say “He's so nice . . .”

BARKER: It's all show.

CD: It's interesting that, while your works have changed drastically from the grotesque horror of your early works, you've kept a strong readership, particularly among horror fans.

BARKER: I'm never going to sell the same numbers as Steve or Dean, and that's perfectly cool, but I do think the audience is there. Steve's and Dean's take on things have always been extremely on the nose. Their take on the world is that the more comfortable the world is in terms of its moral definitions, the more comfortable they are as authors. I don't think they're panderers. I don't think they'd say something they don't believe.

CD: While *The Thief of Always* is a very gentle book in many ways, there's a dark underside to it as well. Is it impossible for you to get away from the horrific?

BARKER: Yes. This is not strictly true. I just published a story in *The New York Times* this Halloween called “The Departed,” which is completely without the grotesque or hor — Well . . . um, almost without the grotesque or horrific. I'm an inclusionist, Tom. I make the distinction between writers who are inclusionist and exclusionist. I mean, Racine is the ultimate exclusionist. A haiku writer like Basho is an exclusionist: let's get the syllables right and no more than that. Melville is an inclusionist. Gunter Grass, Shakespeare, Dickens . . . they're inclusionists. They say “Everything I know about

the world, anything I learn about the world, in the period I am writing this, I am going to put into the pot." It may not always make for the most smooth stew, but there will always be bits you'll like. One of the interesting things for me is that the dark goes in with the light and the light goes in with the dark. It's impossible in the period that you write a book — six months or eighteen months — not to have experiences in both directions. In the case of *Imajica* there were a lot of things going on in my life: I was leaving England, several friends died of AIDS, there was magic and Christianity in my life for all kinds of reasons, and I did not expect them to be there in the amounts that they were. In the case of *The Thief of Always*, I was just touching forty, and it seemed like a good time to look back at the ten-year-old Clive Barker. It was the opportunity after an enormous novel to do something that was sparse and tightly written and short and something that people could read at a single sitting. It also seems that what I had learned from writing the large novels about inclusionism, could not be cast from my head when I came to do a shorter book. So, even though *The Thief of*

Always is ten per cent the length of *Imajica*, it contains thematically — albeit laid very deep in the texture of the fable — many of the concerns which are there in *Imajica*. The concerns about the darkness, the secret self; the ideas about some ultimate enemy who is in fact quite close to one's self. The issue is: can you say something fresh about your obsession?

CD: There are always new angles to be explored.

BARKER: Exactly, plus you're changing. I'll tell you something really honestly from the bottom of my heart. I'm forty. My idea about my mortality has changed so radically seeing people so much younger than myself perish. For me that has changed completely the idea of being forty. When I was twenty-five the idea of being forty seemed like some remote horror. You know what I mean? Now that it's here, it's not only okay, it's great!

CD: Why?

BARKER: For three reasons. Firstly, I'm wiser than I thought I would be. I've learned things.

That's the thing you discount. You think of yourself as an older version of a twenty-five-year-old. When you're twenty-five you think you'll be the same person at forty, you just won't fuck for as long. That turns out not to be the case. The case is that you've learned stuff. You are wiser about the world, and you have some sense about the world that you are glad to have. The other thing is, there are some things made that you are glad to have made. At the age of twenty-five you're naked in the world. Now I have a few rags around my loin.

CD: By the time you're eighty you'll have a closet full of Armanis.

BARKER: I'm not so ambitious! A nice coat of rags will do quite nicely, thank you. The third thing is: when you see people who are younger than you die, you say "I'm lucky just to be here." What the fuck, this is fine. This is a lesson I learned from my father. He'll pass a cemetery in Liverpool and look over this vast array of gravestones and say, "There are a lot of people in there who are really jealous of me."



Photo Credit: Beth Gwinn

THOSE KIDS AGAIN

WAYNE ALLEN SALLEE & NORMAN PARTRIDGE

WAYNE ALLEN SALLEE is the author of the critically-acclaimed novel, *The Holy Terror*, and a forthcoming short story collection from Mark Ziesing Books. NORMAN PARTRIDGE is well-known as a veteran *Cemetery Dance* contributor; his own short story collection, *Mr. Fox and Other Feral Tales*, was released in late 1992.

Second mortgage on a shitty house filled with shitty furniture.

Shitty old van in the driveway.

Indelli cursed. All he had was the big screen TV. A Mitsubishi, just like the Jap planes in World War II. It was the only good thing in his house, and now some little asshole was after it because Indelli had missed a payment or two.

Assholes like that, they never understood about responsibility. First there's you. Then there's those kids 'of yours. Then all the things those kids need: sugary breakfast cereals you'd never eat and fruit-flavored toothpaste and bubble gum if they're good and all that other crap. Then, and only then, comes the stuff that you want.

A big screen TV was great for watching news and sports — Indelli never watched anything else — but it was way down the list by the time you finished ranking your priorities.

"Let the little fucker come out here," Indelli whispered. "Him up in a cozy office on the Loop, giving me shit on some fancy computerized telephone. Let the little asshole try to take my goddamn Mitsubishi."

Indelli had tried to explain it to the guy. He really had, his voice even and sincere and quiet, and he hadn't cussed once.

But when Indelli started to tell the guy about his kids, the guy cut him off with a crack about his wife.

Indelli didn't have a wife. What he had was a big screen TV. That, and a second mortgage, a shitty house, a shitty van, a shitty life, etcetera, etcetera.

And kids. He had kids.

Those kids again. Shit. Sometimes Indelli wondered why he even kept them around.

As if life wasn't tough enough without them.

Desverges threw the collection account onto the pile that would get attorney letters. "Know what I'm saying?"

"What's that, guy?" Ford hung up his phone, simultaneously scribbling a quick note for the night girl to try calling the references living on the West Coast later that evening.

"You know — the old *I can't pay because putting food in my kid's mouth is more important* line of shit."

"If I had a nickel." Ford gulped coffee from a Styrofoam cup, the one thing the agency splurged on. "I had three of those deals before lunch, even."

"What I say," Desverges said, "I get the man on the phone and he says how he didn't have a whole lot of obligations at the time he signed the contract, is, I say it wasn't my phone that made your wife pregnant."

"Or girlfriend," Ford pointed out.

"Or girlfriend," Desverges amended.

Bender, the owner of the agency, weaseled his face into the doorway. He was always getting on Des about posting goofy sayings or drawings on the walls. Above the door, on the frame, Desverges had Scotch-taped an enlarged photocopy of the title of an old William F. Nolan story. *Die, Clown, Die!* hung above Lester Bender's head like a misplaced subtitle in a crazy foreign movie, with an arrow pointing down at his greasy hair. It had been weeks, and the idiot still hadn't thought to look up there.

"Enough talking," Bender barked. "Dial those digits."

"Blow me." Desverges's eyes shot daggers at his boss's backside as the asshole slithered down the narrow hallway; Des's fingers, however, were more obedient, though he did get a little thrill out of punching the numbers to an army base in Satellite Beach, Florida

with his middle digit.

Quarter to two and he was dead on his feet. Des scratched his beard and perused the account in front of him. Jesus. Another busy signal. Military bases were always busy. Marines, especially. Then, when you finally got through, some mope would tell you that the base was secured for the day.

Desverges looked at the next account. He kept them in no particular order. A twenty-year-old waitress in Parma, Ohio with three kids. What was she doing paying (well, *not* paying) for a shitty 35mm camera marked up five hundred percent when she only pulled in eight hundred monthly working nights at the Roaring Lion?

Desverges looked again at the space where she listed her children on the contract.

Anticipated her excuse for not making her \$49.50 monthly installments these past three months.

"Those kids again," he hissed under his breath.

The van started on the first try. Fucking relief of the day number one. Indelli palmed the wheel and left the house behind.

The big screen TV. The kids.

Shit. Sometimes he couldn't stand to be around his kids. It wasn't like he felt right about leaving them alone just because he was in a pissy mood. He had the decency to feel guilty about that. But they were good kids, and they could handle being alone.

It was the damned collection agent's fault. The little bastard, getting under his skin like that.

Things like that happen, you just have to get some distance. You do that, or you wind up taking it out on the ones you love.

Indelli didn't want that to happen.

And then, suddenly, he knew exactly what he wanted to do.

He wanted to drive to Chicago.

He wanted to check out the Loop, and the location of a certain collection agency.

If he hadn't taken the Walgreens brand caffeine tablets before leaving the collection agency, Desverges might have been able to sleep uninterrupted for the entire ride down the Stevenson, perhaps even after the cheerleaders from Marie Skłodowska Curie High School got on the No. 162 at Archer & Pulaski.

But, tired as he had been at five, Desverges was well into a horror novel, and he didn't want to waste quality time on disorienting in-transit dreams. He'd make use of someone else's dreams this trip, thank you very much.

The forty-five minute bus ride down I-55 was his only free time between rituals. Everything was a trade-

off. He was eager to finish the book, but he kept glancing at the window, at the indistinct reflection that could have been almost anyone. He saw Bender — hard lines eroded into his face, reeking of some obsolete cologne like Hai Karate — and then Bender did a slow, fractal dissolve into the image of Desverges's child. Each time the father would glance at the son, the child would exude some new, detailed nuance of perversity.

One minute mirroring fretfulness. The next, giddy excitement.

At least Bender was a constant asshole.

Consistency, what a concept. There was something to be said for it, after all.

Maybe some parents knew that. The ones who had normal kids. Desverges had a "special" kid. That's what his wife always told him. It was better than the words the doctors had for his boy, especially the words the "specialists" had.

It didn't make Des feel any better, though, hearing it, because he always thought a special kid needed a special dad, and he hadn't felt special one moment in his miserable life. He certainly wasn't special enough to handle a kid like the one he'd had with Tina. His dreams told him that. Especially the ones in which he drove Little Des to some strange city, where they'd go looking for a playground.

A playground where he'd abandon Little Des.

A playground where he'd snatch somebody else's perfectly average, perfectly consistent kid.

It was a dream all right, because at the end of it, when Desverges and the new kid arrived home, his wife was actually happy to see him.

Traffic was shitty on the Steve; Desverges knew this from minute one as the rush hour overflow was backed up on Cermak's entrance ramp all the way to the Hilliard projects. Waiting, as an average of three cars turned onto Cermak with each light change, Desverges took time out from *Zombie Kiss* to watch several blacks playing three-card monte. He suspected the delay was due to the Midway Airport El extension.

Unlike those unfortunate zombies who had to stand in the aisles, or the career men and women who slept or gaped fishlike out the darkened windows at billboards for The New Mix 102 or Canadian Mist drinkers who *Ain't Mistbehavin'*, Desverges was dreaming someone else's dreams, trying to make the connection between three Korean War vets and an army of zombies before the author filled him in.

He soon realized, though only because he was mulling over his anonymous reflection after finishing a chapter, that the jam was caused by several broken-down vehicles, one of the last an old, battered tan Econoline van which was stalled in the right lane near

the Ashland Avenue off-ramp. The driver — birch-thin, wearing a Colorado Rockies cap that was haloed by the passing headlights — stood alongside his vehicle, silently cursing its flat tire. The van had a logo on its side for a TV repair service in Streator, Illinois. Poor slob had a ways to go.

On edge from the traffic stop-and-go and with the caffeine tablets acting similarly on his heart, the last thing the thirty-year-old Desverges needed was for the bus to hit Archer and Pulaski just when the cheerleaders were getting off of practice at Curie. They were milling about in front of the Mr. Submarine and they took forever getting on the damn bus, trying to pawn off fifty pennies on the driver if they could.

Des felt as if the girls had been waiting just for him. They were black and Hispanic, loud as Arsenio Hall, and the ones that weren't shrieking up and down the aisles were singing gospel songs.

If it could be called singing.

Those kids again. Desverges was *not* as bigoted as the majority of white Chicagoans who lived on the Southwest side, but these damned cheerleaders made him feel the equal of the blue-rinsed lady pursing her wrinkled lips in the seat next to him.

Desverges glanced out the window.

Christ! The clock outside Marquette National said it was only 6:20. The recent time change had really thrown him off. Plus, they must have made good time after getting off the interstate. Those kids just made it seem longer!

That meant he'd be in the door by quarter of seven and his wife would still be watching that insipid Hollywood show while his "special" kid played with a dinner he should have finished hours ago. Little Des would be covered in ketchup, looking like a demon child on the cover of a horror paperback. Tina wouldn't be paying attention. She'd be watching reruns. That perfect little '70's couple with their perfect brood of '70's kids.

And at the end of that show, before the credits, he'd have to see the well-scrubbed faces of those kids again.

Indelli watched the traffic.

All the suckers wasting time. Everybody all jammed up. Jesus . . . why would anyone want to work downtown, anyway?

A big fucking error in design, that's what it was. Like his shitty house, equipped with bookcases that he never used. And he couldn't even get rid of them, because they were built *right into the fucking walls!*

What was he supposed to do, cover them with sheet rock? Jesus! As it was, he just stored his stuff on the exposed shelves. Saved him buying dressers and cabinets. But he didn't like passing a shelf and seeing

his undershorts piled there, even when they were clean. It was embarrassing.

Some things just shouldn't be out in the open.

Like all these idiots gaping at him through their filthy windshields.

Cars shuttled by. Buses, filled with cattle. It was funny to watch them. Indelli felt superior, not having to be anywhere, not being at anyone's beck and call.

Except his kids. They were probably wondering where he'd gone.

It was getting late, and he was a long way from Streator.

Indelli watched the traffic go. It really wasn't his fault that he'd fucked up. First one wrong turn, then another. The map was fucked, and the road signs were fucked, too. By the time he'd figured out where he was, he'd been turned around but good and headed in the wrong direction.

Didn't matter. It was too late to go looking for the collection agency, anyway. The drones were done for the day.

There'd be other days, though. That was for sure.

Indelli grinned. That decided, he couldn't wait to get home.

Unfortunately, he still had a while to wait.

Desverges estimated the time as being ten of when he got off the bus at Hayford Court, opposite Richard J. Daley College. He lived two houses off Hamlin.

Things hadn't changed during his absence. The house was still too small, and Tina was still Tina.

Desverges cleaned up his son and put him to bed. It took a while to do that. He hated every minute of it, and loathed himself for hating it. By the time he returned to the living room, his wife was pretty-well tanked. Sad to say, he didn't even care where she hid the bottles anymore.

Desverges scanned the newspaper for the latest tidbits on a story he'd been following. At the beginning of the month, the national papers and a prime-time television program that attempted to solve mysteries had begun reporting on a double-kidnapping of sorts. The TV show, featuring the guy who had once played Eliot Ness, advised viewers of a special number to call if they had any information pertaining to the case. (Desverges found that laughable, in that the average viewer *he* knew couldn't even remember that the Chicago suburbs had just gotten an area code change to 708.)

A teenage girl, hiking in Colorado, had disappeared in early July, while a young boy from Lawton, Oklahoma never returned from his paper route the same week. What connected the two disappearances in an age of serial killers and interstate travel was an



incident in mid-September.

A young woman whose husband was stationed at Scott Air Force Base in East St. Louis had been shopping in a Winn-Dixie outside of base housing in O'Fallon. A tan van had been parked next to the family's white Toyota Celica.

Beneath the right front wheel of the van was a photo, lying flip-side down on the gravel. The photo was from a Polaroid One-Step. Faded, illegible writing in pencil was faintly visible.

As curious as Ronald Desverges might have been, given similar circumstances, he wouldn't have touched the photo. But the woman picked it up and, seeing what it revealed, drove back to her home as fast as humanly possible. She later showed her husband, who turned the photograph over to the CQ of the base.

The photograph showed a young girl and a younger boy, both fully clothed, their eyes wide and their mouths taped shut with duct tape. The background revealed that the two bound children might have been held in a mobile home, or possibly an old railroad-type apartment. Maybe even a storm cellar.

At least that was what the *faux* Eliot Ness speculated.

The St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* ran the initial story on the eleventh of September. The Chicago *Tribune* wire service picked up on it, and soon enough the connection was made between the missing children and the subjects in the photo.

Mrs. Tina Desverges disregarded the local and national news and chose to view the plight of the star-struck runaway teens on one of the three Hollywood shows currently telecast opposite *Wheel of Fortune*. Half-hour gossip and exploitation.

The dimpled and cleaved co-anchors closed their program with photographs of the boy from Oklahoma and the girl from Colorado. In spite of himself, Desverges turned and studied their haunted eyes almost every night.

He'd long since stopped wondering if they were really alive.

Sometimes Desverges wished it was he holding the two children captive, that he'd return home to find them happy to see him.

That he'd return home to find Tina and his special son gone.

Other times, his thoughts weren't so pleasant. He'd think of the missing kids locked tight down in his basement workshop.

Still alive and in mortal fear of him.

And then he'd think of putting them to bed in a way he sometimes wanted to put his son to bed.

Once, and for all.

◆ ◆ ◆

Shitty van. Shitty spare tire (under-inflated, of course). Shitty interstate.

Shitty hometown.

It was shortly after eight when Indelli finally turned onto Route 18, glad the cops who'd helped him change the tire hadn't seen any need to search the van.

Chicago cops were paranoid. So was Indelli. The stash of weed in the glove compartment explained that, though.

The van that read Vincent's QuikTV Repair turned onto the main street of downtown Streator, Illinois, its driver tired and wary. "I've got to find a closer connection," Indelli said, breaking the silence he'd kept for over two hours.

Since sucking up to the coppers.

If you didn't count singing along with Al Stewart's "Time Passages" on WLLI out of Joliet. But Indelli hadn't even been aware that he had been singing. He pulled into the new Citgo on Iowa, wanting to pick up a Tombstone pizza or something, plus some cereal and toothpaste and maybe some bubble gum.

Bad move. Some snotnose couldn't ring the register right and Indelli had to wait that much longer, staring at a rack of paperbacks that were priced at five fucking bucks apiece while the kid spluttered and whined. Indelli couldn't remember being that stupid when he was a kid, and they had to work registers manually back then.

Finally, the idiot manager straightened things out. Indelli returned to the van, thinking of the stupid paperback covers. Slobbering zombies and kids with glowing red eyes. Five fucking bucks apiece for something someone made up. Unbelievable.

Indelli unlocked the van, tossed the groceries onto the passenger seat. He saw no sense in rushing now. Why? For who?

Those damn kids again. That's who.

Let 'em wait, just like he'd waited for the cops in Chicago. Indelli cruised a bit. He couldn't get downtown Chicago out of his mind. All that fucking traffic. All that fucking noise. People running around like nuts. It was no place for people to be. No wonder the collection agent was such an asshole.

Idly, Indelli wondered if the collection agent had any kids.

Chicago was no place to raise kids.

This was. This was a good place. The streets were so damn quiet. Dead, that's what they were, but kids who said that didn't know the real meaning of the word.

All the kids went to Sonny's Darkside out on Illinois 28 past town. Indelli's kids didn't go there, though. Old people lived in Streator, mostly. Compliant people. Nothing ever happened to shake them

up.

Indelli cruised Park and Otter Creek, then went up Illinois past Teets.

Not a damn thing going on.

Went to the second-mortgaged bungalow next to the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe line that intersected James Street. Big hairy deal. Inside, he ate the cheese pizza and afterwards shook the pieces of crust around in the box like it was a game of Razzle.

Then he got tired of that and went back outside and around opposite the bathroom window. By the storm cellar, carpeted with that green astroturf that every house seemed to have nowadays.

Opened the latch to see those kids again.

His kids.

They'd be showing their photos on the big screen television now, along with the shot he'd dropped by that Winn-Dixie just for fun.

The key stuck in the lock. The bulb past the bottom stair had burned out. The kids had learned enough to stop whimpering when he came down the

stairs.

They were back there somewhere, in the blackness.

Indelli tossed the toothpaste, heard it hit something soft. Threw the cereal after it. Scattered the gum.

Settled back on the bottom stair and listened to his kids eating dinner.

After a while he heard the first bubble pop, the first crazy giggle.

The three of them together, a real family.

Indelli stared into the darkness, trying to picture the collection agent's face, trying to imagine what the guy's kid would look like, if he had one.

He couldn't do it.

Unlike some people, Indelli didn't have a whole lot of imagination.

He'd just have to see for himself.

— CD

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MATTHEW J.
COSTELLO

NIGHTMARE ALLEY

What we have here is an interactive installment of the Alley. Yes, you'll get to select what you want to read and just what you might like to skip. And if you choose to give all the following nightmares a bye, well God's speed.

(Which — considering how fast He answers prayers these days — must be a snail's pace, despite the protestations of all our fundamentalist friends out there in tele-evangelism land.)

Today's topics are Sequels, Cutting the Check, and Non-Fan Mail . . . presented in order as 1, 2 and 3.

All set? Here's the interactive part. Make your selection . . . *now*.

1 — I never intended that my novel *Wurm* would lead to a sequel. *Wurm*, a 1991 novel, dealt with the discoveries of very strange life forms on the ocean floor near the hydrothermal vents. And it was, yes, a self-contained novel. Or so I thought.

Of course, *Wurm* was a "big" book, with New York City besieged by chemosynthesizing tube worms directed by an intelligence from across the universe. It was supposed to be my homage to the science fiction/horror thrillers of the Fifties.

And, in that spirit, the book ended with more than a few

threads dangling, kind of like the smoky question mark that appeared after the words "The End" in a few fondly remembered creature features.

But — honest! — no sequel was planned. It was simply the way that book was organized. Then an Important Reviewer — in a very nice review, thank you — said that the book is obviously ripe for a sequel.

Maybe . . . but I wasn't planning to write one. Then a writer I respected (as opposed to . . .) sent a nice letter saying, in essence, where is the rest of the story?

And then I started to think, well, maybe they *do* have a point.

Finally, I was approached by Twilight Press, a new small press, who was eager to do a limited edition novella that would finish the *Wurm* saga. And I agreed to do so.

So nearly two years later, I returned to the world of *Wurm*, to the characters, and a Manhattan besieged by the opportunistic creatures. The time I chose was five years later, and the world is a nightmarish place, a universal Mexico where no one touches the water unless they're really sure where it came from.

Due out this March, *Garden*, the idyllically titled novella, finishes the story, tying up all loose ends in ways that surprised me. (Though I was sorely tempted to leave a few doors open. Hey, it's

that kind of story.)

Oh — and did I enjoy writing the sequel?

Yes, because of the jump in time I took, the opportunity to look at the world after the monsters came. That was fun.

And no — because meeting my characters again, after such a long time, was like going to a high school reunion. These people once meant a lot to you but now — hey, lives change, time moves on.

Perhaps more sequels in the next Alley, where I can talk about how one CD-ROM begat another.

2 — Believe it or not, there are thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands of people out there who'd like to be writers.

Oh, how they imagine the prestige and glamour of being a Professional Writer, someone who writes novels, who actually has books in a bookstore.

So — in the interest of educating the public, I thought I'd share one of the many processes that writers experience, a bit of life as a Pro, if you will. A fantasy to be sure, but — to the rattling bones of a working professional — damned close to what it must feel like.

And here we're talking about Cutting the Check.

You see, writers need to have their Checks (advances, royalties, option money, etc.) in order to do

things like, say, pay the mortgage that's months overdue . . . or even buy groceries. We can assume that Visa and Discover are already *well* maxed out, and the only recourse other than starvation and embarrassment is to make the publisher actually . . .

(All together now . . .)

"Cut the Check!"

Now, what does this expression mean? Cut the Check? I myself am used to writing checks. And true, I often have to tear the check out of a checkbook. But that usually seems a fairly easy and painless task.

Not to mention speedy. Couldn't take more than a few seconds. Tops.

But for a publisher . . . or an agent . . . or a studio . . . or a television station, for them to Cut the Check? Well, all Professional Writers know that takes a very long time indeed.

It can take months. Months

to Cut the Check, and why?

Ah — here we get to the secret part, the part I'm about to reveal. Namely, why it takes so long to Cut the Check, to actually produce the one thing that stands between the struggling Professional Writer and the nasty pack of wolves circling the door hungrily.

First, you have to understand that the check has to come from the very bowels of the building. There, sooty faced men and women stand around an enormous cauldron which contains the bubbling mixture that is the raw material, the *essence* of the Check. And when that mixture is ready — it takes *time* — the check is ready to be poured.

And oh — what an exciting moment that is, as all the forge workers gather close to the check mold and then the material is poured oh-so-slowly and carefully . . .

Sometimes, something goes

wrong, and that check has to be scrapped, and the time consuming process must begin again.

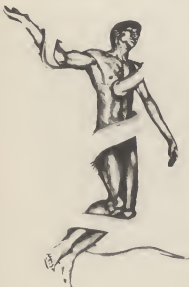
But if the pour is successful, there is still no rejoicing in the smoky bowels of the accounting department. No, that would be premature.

(Meanwhile, you — the Professional Writer — are calling, er, asking nervously, is my check ready? Is it in the mail . . . (a whole other process, to be sure) only to hear, that "the Check hasn't been cut yet.")

No, because now the check sitting on the mold has to cool. And that can take a while, sitting there, cooling. Sitting. Cooling.

(The wolves snarl and snap.)

Until — yes — the day arrives. And the Check is ready to be Cut. The Master Check Cutter is summoned, probably a portly man with rock-steady hands . . . and the eye of an eagle who's done too many laps since his last mouse.



MATTHEW J. COSTELLO

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A hush falls over the bowels of the building as the Cutter approaches the hopefully-cooled check basin. (Not too much insider's lingo I hope. But people want to know . . .)

The hush, the tension in the room becomes almost unbearable as the Cutter approaches, studies the material.

He stands there, poised, touching the surface of the . . . Check.

And then — if all is ready, if the material does not have any trace of rubberiness, if the check is not too large, the Cutter will take his tools and begin the demanding process of bending over the mold and Cutting the Check.

It must be amazing to watch a master at work. And when the check is good and cut, a cheer echoes through the forge room.

Though you — the Professional Writer — may still have to wait. You see, now the check must be mailed. And that can be an

even more labyrinthine process.

3 — The last *Nightmare Alley* brought a Non-Fan letter from a new novelist, a new Professional Writer (who may want to check item number 2 above). The writer took me to task for implying that writers who came after the 50s and 60s don't have a real grasp of fear.

Said letter prompted me to return to my column where — sure enough — that implication was there. I seemed to be saying that if you didn't live with air raid drills, nuclear Armageddon, Vietnam crawling up your ass, and the great riots of the 60s, your idea of what's scary might be a little *limp*.

(And I recommended that having kids might be a good way to capture some of that balls in your throat feeling.)

Well, I guess I did overstate my case a bit. Reminds me of one of my two graduate theses, one where I did an analysis of the psychological distortions and schizo-

phrenia in Lewis Carroll's Alice books, using R.D. Laing's *Politics of Experience* and Aldous Huxley's *Doors of Perception* as reference texts.

My Theses Prof wrote back that I couldn't distinguish between the literary essay and more fantastic forms of fiction.

Hey, we've all got our limitations.

And so I write back to said new novelist, a very talented, promising writer, I write . . . "Blame It On the Brown Acid."

Which was my way of saying that my column shouldn't be looked at for True Facts.

But you knew that, didn't you?

(By the way, you too can write and question what I do c/o The Tie-Die Emporium, 22 Piping Rock Drive, Ossining, NY 10562. I keep a close watch on my mail box . . . watching for those checks . . .)

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TYSON BLUE

NEEDFUL KINGS & OTHER THINGS

By now, most of you have probably had a chance to read Stephen King's newest novel, *Dolores Claiborne*, and to see just how fine a piece of work it is. But for those of you who haven't, (although you should just set the magazine down right now, go out and buy it and find out), I figure you'll keep reading, so I'll tell you myself.

Dolores Claiborne is a powerful, short novel, told entirely in the first person and without a single chapter break. A 65-year-old housekeeper who has spent the majority of her life on a small island off the coast of Maine is suspected in the death of her longtime employer, a venal old bitch who has hired and fired half the women on the island during her time there. Although she denies vehemently having anything to do with the old woman's death, Dolores Claiborne readily owns up to having killed her husband thirty years before, and the bulk of this superbly-realized novel is her justification.

Although she has been beaten and mentally abused throughout her adult life by her brutal, ignorant husband, Joe, it is not this which finally moves Dolores to kill him. His molestation of their daughter is what finally does him

in.

The central events of the novel are set in the path of the solar eclipse which moved across central Maine in July of 1963, just as were pivotal events in King's last novel, *Gerald's Game*, which, although published first, was actually written after *Dolores*. In fact, readers of this novel will finally get an explanation for the baffling vision seen by Jessie Burlingame in *Gerald's Game*, a mirror version of which is incorporated into the new novel as well.

The two books were originally to have been published together under the title *In the Path of the Eclipse*, and it is easy to see why. Both novels deal with women trapped in their own personal hells, and the ways in which their own inner strength allows them to deal with, escape from, and triumph over them.

The story is written in the colloquial Downeast manner of rural Maine, territory King has worked before, most notably in his short stories "Uncle Otto's Truck" and "Mrs. Todd's Shortcut." And in the Penguin HighBridge audio version, actress Frances Sternhagen turns in a stunning, flawless unabridged reading of the novel, which is sure to garner attention at

Golden Headset award time. The 9-hour, six-cassette package retails for \$30.00 and is available at bookstores everywhere.

And best of all, the company has abandoned those godawful slipcase-styled packages used with *Gerald's Game* and *The Waste Lands* and gone back to the enclosed formats used for the *Four Past Midnight* and *Needful Things* tapes.

I have no idea where King is going to go from here — although a retrospective short-story collection is warming up in the wings, no new novel projects are in the works as yet. But with *Dolores Claiborne*, he continues to explore new avenues for his storytelling skills and innovative ways of telling them.

In the October 5, 1992 issue of *Newsweek*, King was listed as a member of the "Cultural Elite 100."

King was spotlighted by a question in the October 18, 1992 issue of *USA Weekend*, the Gannett Sunday supplement. The item, which featured a color photo, plugged *Dolores* and mainly concentrated on King's interest in baseball. For those keeping score, King, like myself, backed the Atlanta Braves in the '92 World Series. Oh well, maybe next year...

King once again made the

"Power 101," *Entertainment Weekly's* annual listing of the 101 most influential people in the entertainment business. King appeared at #56 on the list, up from #63 last year, based on the success of *Gerald's Game*, "Sleepwalkers" and "The Lawnmower Man." The list appears in Issue 142 of the magazine, the October 30 issue, which also features a short review of the "Sleepwalkers" video release.

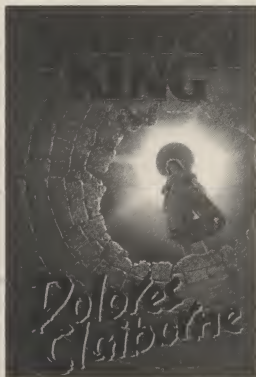
And when TV Guide polled celebs for their guesses about what Maggie Simpson's first words would be in its December 1, 1992, issue, King's guess was "Bart has my Butterfinger."

The November 16, 1992, issue of *The National Law Journal* (Vol. 15, No. 11), features a front-page story, "His Tales of Horror," about King's recent legal battles over "The Lawnmower Man" and other recent courtroom battles. Although aimed at lawyers, the article would be of general interest as well, and may be obtained for \$3.00 by writing the paper at 111 Eighth Avenue, New York, NY 10011. Thanks to reader and fellow attorney Bernard Farber for passing that item along.

On the public appearance front, King made an appearance on "Good Morning, America" on November 2, the day before the election, and appeared as well on Whoopi Goldberg's syndicated talk show, where the two discussed novels, films and the spookier qualities of cats. The show aired on November 13 in my viewing area—Rochester, NY—but may air at a different time where you are. check local listings for time and channel, as they say . . .

And, finally, you can find a rather unique King appearance at your local record or video store.

BMG Video has released a home video version of the Rock Bottom Reminders' May 25, 1992, concert at the ABA Convention in Anaheim, California. A brief clip from the tape was seen on the Goldberg show, but no vocal was audible. On tape, however, you can hear and see King the rocker in all his guitar-man glory, along with such literary luminaries as Dave Barry, Robert Fulghum, Amy Tan and Matt Groening. The 45-minute set features such rock clas-



sics as "Money," "Sea of Love" (sung, along with "Teen Angel," by King) and "Gloria," and is a must for all die-hard King collectors.

And how does King stack up as a vocalist? Well, he's not as bad as I would've thought, based on his singing on the *Dark Tower* tapes, but it'd probably be a good thing for him to hang onto his day job for now . . .

Elsewhere in Maine, Rick Hautala offers a guided tour of a haunted mill in his latest novel, *Dark Silence*. It seems that centuries before, an old woman was hanged as a witch on the site, curs-

ing all usurpers of the land to follow. And now, as young Brian Fraser and his father and stepmother are trying to put their own shattered lives together, a sinister force in the ruins of an old mill built on the site threatens to destroy them forever.

In this novel, Hautala has created the most severely dysfunctional family in all of his novels. Usually, there is at least one person somewhere in the book who has his head screwed on straight. Here, however, everyone has problems. Edward, the father, is trying to care for his new wife, frightfully injured in a rock-climbing fall, but hindered by a secret he has kept for twenty years. Son Brian is trying to get through the summer with as little friction as possible while trying to avoid Dianne, his stepmother, whom he hates. And Dianne is trying to hold onto her sanity in the face of overwhelming waves of rage and hatred which may or may not be generated by her own mind.

And out at the old mill, an unknown watcher has his own agenda for the Frasers . . . or is it someone, something, else's?

Hautala continues to develop by leaps and bounds as a novelist, and it's about time someone out there realized it. Give *Dark Silence* a try.

Dean Koontz fans will have plenty to read for the immediate future.

First, there's a new novel, *Dragon Tears*. A male-female police team find themselves racing against time to stop a seemingly-godlike being who has vowed to kill them in less than twenty-four hours. Beginning with the most arresting and Chanderlesque opening sentence Koontz has ever written ("Tuesday was a fine Cali-

fornia day, full of sunshine and promise, until Harry Lyon had to shoot someone at lunch."), this novel is at turns funny, terrifying, wry, suspenseful and never dull. Koontz puts ordinary people up against a being who can literally bring time itself to a stop and makes it seem like a fair fight!

And the novel is full of memorable characters and classic vignettes, my favorite of which is a confrontation between Lyons, his partner, and a killer in an attic full of mannequins. Their negotiations are unique in the annals of suspense literature.

The novel will also be available in a deluxe limited edition from Putnam, with illustrations by Phil Parks, and in an unabridged audio version from Simon & Schuster Audio, running 13 hours on eight cassettes, read by J.O. Sanders. The package, available in January, retails for \$29.95.

Audio Koontz fans should also not miss the unabridged audio version of *The Bad Place*, available from The Reader's Chair, 860 Chappell Road, Hollister, CA 95023. As with the company's prior audio versions of *Cold Fire* and *Hideaway*, this 10-cassette, 15-hour reading is performed by Michael Hanson and Carol Cowan and packaged in a magnificent, durable hardshell case which is light-years ahead of anyone else in the industry. These three tapes are 75 percent of this young company's catalogue, and deserve your support more than I can say. Buy them now!!

Dan Simmons's readers had a double treat this summer, with two new novels from one of the genre's brightest talents. First came *Children of the Night*, far and away the most unique Dracula novel I've ever read. Grounded firmly in the real world, the novel follows a young doctor, Kate Newman, as she finds a strange young boy in a hospital in Romania, adopts him

and brings him to the United States, only to find out two things in very rapid succession.

First, the child has a remarkable genetic oddity which could herald a cure for AIDS and cancer. Second, she is being stalked by a group of superhuman, virtually-indestructible beings who will stop at nothing to steal the child back from her.

The resultant chase leads Kate back into the most primitive, undeveloped regions of Romania, to a final confrontation with Vlad Tepes, the historical Dracula, and an explosive climax.

As always, Simmons has done his homework. Both the immunological background and the historical backstory of Dracula's real life are laid in with accuracy, lending a needed air of verisimilitude to this novel. It's also interesting to note how the characters' movements in the novel parallel those of the character's in Stoker's original classic, beginning in Romania, moving out to the West, and then back to Romania for the chilling ending...

Then, late in the summer, came *The Hollow Man*, the story of Jeremy, a mathematician who also happens to be telepathic. When his wife, a fellow telepath, dies, Jeremy finds that he has lost not only his wife, but his sole shield from the thoughts of those around him. In seeking to escape from this, he plunges into a hellish journey across the country which will eventually lead him to confront a strange entity which has been watching him for years, and will show him the solution to his life's equation in ways he never anticipated.

Here, as in *Children*, a solid scientific background, including enough complex equations to make all but the most mathematical of readers feel that, yup, this guy must be a mathematician, 'cause I don't know what the fuck he's talkin' about!, makes the more

science-fictional aspects of this novel seem more realistic. And Simmons' skills at characterization make it easy to stick with Jeremy, who is onstage through virtually every page of the novel.

Both of these fine novels confirm Dan Simmons' place as a major voice in the various genres who could justifiably lay claim to him.

Clive Barker is back with *The Thief of Always*, a fable about a young man named Harvey who, trapped in the doldrums of February, wishes for an escape from boredom. When a grinning man aptly named Rictus offers him diversion at Mr. Hood's wonderful house, he takes it. Every day is summer, every evening Halloween, every night is Christmas, and if every day which passes is a year in the world outside, well, Harvey is enjoying himself, isn't he?

This is a book aimed at younger readers, and both of my boys, ages 13 and 8, enjoyed it immensely when I gave it the acid test and read it aloud to them recently. Contrary to earlier reports, the book is illustrated profusely by Barker himself, and although the novel lacks the graphic horror and violence of Barker's earlier work, a close look might reveal a familiar figure lurking in a drawing or two.

Harper Audio has also made the novel available in a two-cassette, three-hour audio version read by actor John Glover, best remembered for his role as the building tycoon in *Gremlins 2* or as the right-wing commando in Stuart Woods' *Grass Roots*.

Lisa W. Cantrell has been absent from the horror scene for far too long, and makes a triumphant return with her first hardcover, Tor's *Boneman*. Set in a North Carolina city, the novel is a skillful blend of mystery, police procedural and horror revolving around an attempt by a Haitian gang to take over the city's burgeoning

When dealers begin turning up dead, then are later reported alive again, detective Dallas Reid begins to think something fishy is going on. Joined by a state investigator, Jackie Swann, he finds himself embroiled in something he's never encountered: a drug ring using voodoo as an enforcement tool.

ing homelife, we never actually get to see it first hand. But that's a small quibble — Lisa Cantrell has always delivered top-notch novels throughout her career. This latest book is no exception.

So when Heidi finds a handful of photos of an illicit and illegal sex

Along the way, Tessier manages to instill in the reader sympathy for Heidi despite her basically sleazy actions. Mystery fans will find plenty to enjoy here, and horror fans have several gut-wrenching scenes to relish as well.

Secret Strangers is a winner; make sure not to miss this one!

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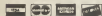
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MEET THE BEETLES

J. CHARLES CARUSO

J. CHARLES CARUSO is an exciting new writer from the Seattle area. His novel, *Gasoline*, is currently making the publishing rounds, while he stays busy crafting more creepy short stories like the following tale. "Meet the Beetles" is his first appearance in *Cemetery Dance*, and his first professional sale.

By the time Sylvia Hutchinbeck had her front door halfway open, Roy Chubb was starting to imagine the letter he would write to *Penthouse*:

"I could tell she wanted me from the first moment her eyes moved up and down my body. As an exterminator, I naturally encounter a lot of women home alone during the day, but usually things never go farther than a few hot glances and a flirtatious remark or two. This one was different. She answered the door in a green silk robe hanging open far enough for me to see that her breasts were not only bounteous but that she had a small mole at the seven o'clock position of her pink left nipple."

Mrs. Hutchinbeck pulled her robe closed and cinched the belt tighter. "You're here about the bugs?" She asked only to be polite. His name stitched onto the front of his shirt and the green and yellow X-Time Pest Control logo on his cap made it obvious why he was there.

"Yes, ma'am." He handed her the bundled newspaper he'd scooped up off the front steps on his way to the door.

"Thanks." Her mouth flickered into a half-smile that disappeared before it could disintegrate into anything less kind.

It was almost eleven. He had wondered why she hadn't picked up the morning paper yet and had half worried that no one would be home, but she looked like she'd just woken up and she smelled like she had

to have a hell of a hangover.

"Well, come on in and take a look," she said, moving out of the way. She pushed a strand of stringy blonde hair out of her face and hooked it behind her ear. She had a nose like the prow of a ship, noble looking, and the soft pampered skin of a sorority girl turned rich housewife, but her clear eyes burned with a cold intensity unblurred by the previous night's alcohol.

He ducked his head slightly as he stepped inside. Moving past her, he stopped just at the edge of the living room. He glanced around. Magazines and dirty dishes cluttered the room. Rumpled clothes hung off the arms of the gray leather chairs and sofa. A blue blanket lay tangled on the couch and a bed pillow rested at one end. On the floor nearby sat an empty wine bottle and no glass.

"Excuse the mess," she said. "My life's been a little hectic lately. I haven't been much of a housekeeper."

Roy's first thought was, *No shit*, but he said, "Looks kind of like my apartment."

Her soft laugh sounded genuine but it somehow didn't seem directed towards his comment. "The kitchen is right through here," she said.

He followed her through to the kitchen. Thick muscles stood out on her calves and there were calluses on the backs of her ankles. Again there were dirty dishes, a sink full flowing out onto the counter on either side. Among the dishes sat a few empty tin cans and assorted other food packages. "I guess I never would have had this problem with the roaches if I'd kept the place a little cleaner," she said. "Since my husband left me for his sweet young thing, I just haven't had the energy or the incentive to do much house work. I haven't done much of anything to tell you the truth. Sometimes I don't even know why I'm

alive."

"Your husband left you?" Roy regarded her approvingly again. She was perhaps in her early forties and although she had begun to show signs of aging — crow's feet at the corners of her eyes, a gray hair or two at her temples, a slight droop to the flesh under her chin — she remained a very attractive woman. He could scarcely imagine what the woman her husband had left with must look like.

Mrs. Hutchinbeck winced. "Yes. He came home one day after work and started packing a suitcase. I had to ask him what he was doing? Can you believe that? Not that I couldn't figure it out, but you need to hear it said, if you know what I mean. You have to know for sure."

Roy nodded sympathetically, stared down at the lemon-colored linoleum between her feet. Her toe nails had been painted red once upon a time. Now the polish was worn down to little circular patches on the nails.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I've told you more than you wanted to know. I'm sure you're not interested in my personal life."

"No, that's fine. I really don't mind hearing—" His words lost their energy towards the end. He paused, then asked, "Where specifically have you seen the roaches?"

"Pretty much everywhere," she said. "Over by the fridge, under the edges of the cabinets, in the sink."

The sink was so crowded with plates, pans, and silverware, Roy could hardly imagine how she had managed to see a roach, but he moved over to inspect. He lifted a pan to look underneath. "Well, I have to tell you that keeping the area free of old foodstuffs is going to be your best deterrent in the future." He bent to open a cabinet. Mixing bowls and serving plates stood stacked on the shelves. He didn't see any insects. He moved over to the pantry door.

"I was going to make some coffee," Mrs. Hutchinbeck said. "Would you like some? It's Starbucks."

"Sure," he said. "I'll have a cup." His morning dose had begun to wear off and a shot of caffeine sounded like just the thing to see him through to lunch hour.

Roy pulled open the pantry door. A smooth-backed bug scamped quickly away from the light, into the back of the cabinet. He reached after it, shoving a bottle of catsup out of the way. The bottle tipped over and knocked down the vinegar and the olive oil. "Shit, sorry about that."

"That's okay," she said. "Did you see something?" She moved a large pan from beneath the faucet and slid the coffee pot under the tap.

"Yeah." Roy adjusted his cap on his head. He had seen something, but what he saw wasn't a cockroach. He was pretty certain it had been a ground

beetle. But those didn't usually come into people's houses — certainly not as an infestation. "That's really odd," he said.

"What is?" She glanced up at him from spooning grounds out of the gray and green bag into the filter in the basket of the coffee maker.

"I think it was an ordinary beetle."

"Beetle, roach, what's the difference? The spray makes them all equally dead doesn't it?"

"Well, carabids — beetles are nocturnal like roaches, but they're also carnivorous. They tend to be pretty beneficial insects. We generally recommend against using pesticides on them."

"I've got bugs crawling all over my kitchen and you're telling me they're good bugs so you don't want to kill them?" She was incredulous. "If they're in my house, they're not benefitting me, all right? I called you because I wanted you to get rid of them. Now get rid of them, please."

Roy went back through the living room and let himself out the front door without saying a word. He didn't like her tone one bit. He was tempted to get back in his truck and go on to his next stop without another word to this spoiled Lynnwood bitch who lived like a pig. He didn't give a good goddamn about her money. She couldn't boss him around like that — he knew what he was talking about. Those carabids didn't belong where they were, but if she'd just hire a maid, or (heaven forbid) clean up the place herself, the beetles would leave the house in peace. It was as simple as that.

He got into the truck and stuck his key in the ignition, pausing a moment before starting up.

Shit, he couldn't just leave. Gene had been on his ass enough already, ever since that old man on Mercer Island had called in to complain about him. Like Roy would actually go through the paranoid fucker's personal belongings, whatever that phrase was supposed to mean. No, he had to smile and put up with anything the woman said to him. "Goddamn it!" He banged the hell out of his palm against the dash and climbed out to get a pesticide canister from the back of the truck.

In the kitchen again, Roy pumped the canister and began spraying along the floor at the foot of the cupboards. "Now, you're going to want to wash all the dishes in here before you use them again," he said above the rhythmic wheeze of the coffee maker. "Even the ones that are already clean. It's just to be on the safe side."

Mrs. Hutchinbeck wrinkled up her nose. "Oh, my God. Stop. Stop! You're going to have to use something else. No way can I tolerate that smell in my house." She retreated to the living room. "I think I'm going to throw up."

He quit spraying. "Is it really that bad?" he called.

"It's the worst," she said. "Can't you smell it?"

"Actually, I can't. I guess I've just gotten so used to the smell that I can't even notice it when I try." The funny thing was that the other pesticide—a supposedly odorless pesticide—smelled awful to him. He tried not to consider what terrible effects that might indicate the chemicals were having on him. This was his job and it was a good one. He couldn't simply walk away from it because he started detecting odors no one else could pick up on. He never told anyone else about it either. He feared they'd think he was losing his mind, which was what he half-thought himself.

Roy moved through the living room. Mrs. Hutchinbeck was kneeling on one end of the couch, struggling to slide open the window. "Sorry about that," he said. "I'll go get the odorless stuff. It probably won't be quite as effective against the carabids, but at least you won't smell it."

"Thank you," she said, not sounding like she really meant it.

Roy went out the front door and cut across the lawn to the truck. Again the temptation to leave rose up and leered at him. This visit was turning hellish. He wished he *could* take off, cut his losses now and be done with this terrible woman. And to think his first impulse was to sleep with her. He hawked a lugie and spit it towards the bushes. He hit the bush, but the bile taste in the back of his throat didn't go away.

He sprayed the whole kitchen area with the second pesticide. "Where else have you noticed beetles?" he asked. He set the canister down on the linoleum of the hallway leading to the garage.

She shook her head. "Mostly just here in the kitchen."

"Okay. Well, they'll probably coming in from your back yard for some reason. I should spray the perimeter of the building, try to keep what we don't kill from coming inside."

She frowned for a moment.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Nothing." She shook her head again and this time gave him a smile. It was a genuine smile, sexy too.

Roy had begun to feel like a yo-yo, but his interest in her revived.

"Well, go ahead," she said. "I think I'll get into some clothes while you're doing that. When you've finished we can have that cup of coffee together."

"That sounds good," he said, thinking that she was genuinely interested in him and just had a hard time expressing it. He picked up the canister and headed to the sliding glass door that let out onto the back patio.

Roy could not have explained what drew him to the storage shed by the fence after he had finished spraying along the edge of the house. Perhaps mere curiosity led him to cup his hands around his eyes and

peer in through the dusty window of the locked shed. Whatever it was that drove him had certainly been less defined than a hunch. Roy did not consider himself a snoop, no matter what that Mercer Island coot said about him. However, some part of him felt absolutely compelled to peek in through the shed window.

He couldn't see much. A couple Rubbermaid barrels huddled under the window. A red Sears lawn mower was shoved against the far wall, its handle folded over to take up less room. Two touring bikes leaned together, collecting spider webs. And near the back of the shed, something low and flat lay covered with black plastic garbage bags. Roy couldn't make out much of a shape to it but whatever it was had to be five or six feet long. Next to it sat a dark leather suitcase.

It was nothing, less than nothing. With a shrug at his own foolish curiosity, Roy started across the lush lawn towards the covered patio. The aluminum canister banged against his leg as he walked.

Someone was looking at him. He stopped walking and glanced instinctively to one of the windows along the back of the house. Mrs. Hutchinbeck's face floated palely behind the glass, her nose pointing at him like an accusing finger. She bit her lower lip, but Roy barely noticed. Her eyes were fixed on his, searching them. Their gazes remained locked for long, uncomfortable moments.

Roy tried to smile. He failed, but the spell was broken. Her face disappeared from the window. He couldn't move.

"Hey, you about ready for that coffee?" she called from the open sliding glass door of the kitchen. Her smile shone as bright as the June sun that glared now from the highest point of its daily arc. She wore tight fitting jeans and a loose white cotton blouse. A gold bow held her hair back in a ponytail.

God, she's good-looking. Roy thought. He said, "Sure, just let me wash my hands first." He set his canister just inside the door and headed down the hall where she pointed him—second door on the right.

When he came out, she was sitting on the sofa in the living room. Two full cups sat steaming on the coffee table. "Do you take cream or sugar?"

"No," he said. "Black's fine." He sat down next to her, picked up the cup closest to him, took a sip.

"It's not what you think," she said.

"What are you talking about?"

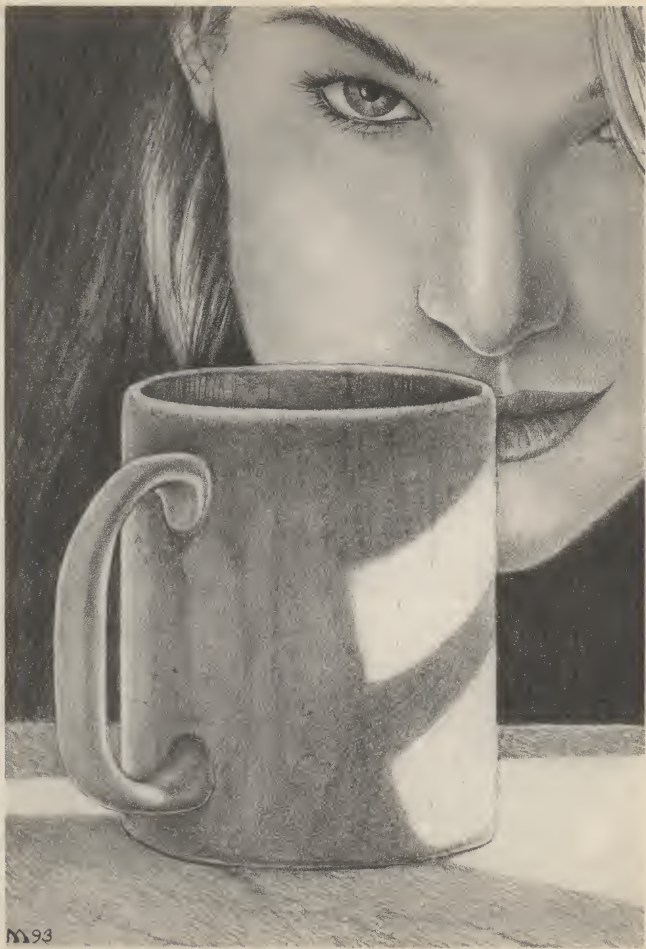
"Just kiss me," she said.

He did. He curled his hand behind her neck and pulled her to him. Her mouth opened softly under his lips.

She pulled away, breathless. "Aren't you afraid of me?"

"Why should I be afraid of you?"

"Never mind." She smiled with her mouth, but her eyes kept a wariness to them. "Let's finish our



coffee. Then you can make love to me."

Roy scalded his throat gulping the stuff down.

Mrs. Hutchinbeck laughed and drank hers slowly, watching him over the rim of her cup.

"Let's go to the bedroom," Roy said.

"No," she said. "Right here on the couch."

She laughed as he fumbled with the buttons of her blouse. "I don't know why I bothered to change out of the robe."

Roy rolled off her and said, "I think my knees are carpet burned, but that was fantastic."

"The least I could do for all your trouble."

He laughed. "It's no trouble. It's my job."

"I didn't mean spraying the bugs," she said. "I meant the trouble you're going to have. I put poison in the coffee."

Roy felt the sweat covering him turn cold as ice water. "What are you talking about?" But he knew. He had suspected all along of course, but he had willingly disbelieved. Now ignoring the evidence, what little of it there was, had become impossible. She had killed her husband. That was his suitcase in the shed. And under those plastic garbage bags, Roy was sure he would find the bug-cleaned skeleton of the husband who had left. Carabids are carnivorous; they thrive on carrion. When they had finished eating the husband, they naturally moved into the house, looking for more dead meat. Now they would find it. It would be him.

Roy's stomach lurched into his mouth. His tongue turned sour. "How could you do this to me?" he said. The sobs in his voice were startling, but they didn't surprise him. "I don't want to die."

She threw her head back and laughed.

Suddenly she looked to him like a witch, an evil old hag. She had destroyed him, killed him. But he wouldn't die alone. No, if he was going to die, he could at least take her with him. He ran to the kitchen.

"It's too late," she called after him, still laughing.

She quit laughing when she saw the knife in his hand. Her eyes went wide and he dove towards her. "No!" He raised his arm, brought the knife down. The blade slid easily into the soft white flesh of her belly. He stabbed her again and again, blind with rage. She squirmed beneath him. Blood was everywhere, all over both of them.

He stopped when his arm got tired, sat on the red soaked carpet next to her.

She was still alive, but barely. Her eyes burned up at him. "You fool," she said, coughing. Blood trickled from the corner of her mouth. "I put the poison in my coffee, not yours."

— CD



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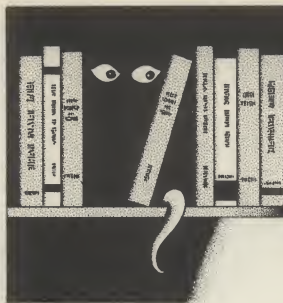
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BOOK REVIEWS

1992. Ah, the year that was. The year of the troubled Columbiad, Clinton and Perot, and of Madonna and Sex. The year that Sinead O'Connor blew her big chance for sainthood (though martyrdom's still a possibility). It was also a year of change in dark suspense and horror. Nothing too radical or revolutionary, but still plenty to note.

Most of the biggies had some major books. Clive Barker's *The Thief of Always* I'll address later in this column. Suffice to say that it's as different from *Imajica* as that fantasy epic was from *Books of Blood*. *Thief* is a lean fable for readers of all ages dealing with the taking of magic and the giving it back. It's pretty wonderful. Over in the more Gothic works, Anne Rice cranked out another Lestat novel with the safe-sex-endorsing *Tale of the Body Thief*. Stephen King's *Waste Lands* added a third installment to the Gunslinger saga. But King's major achievement was the peculiarly tandem set of *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*. Fantasy plays a low-key role in each, but both novels are human-centered accounts of women under considerable stress. People stories. *Dolores Claiborne*, especially, is a knockout. It's some of King's

most bravura writing since "The Body" in *Different Seasons*. Dan Simmons also published three books in 1992. *Children of the Night* is his contemporary novel of the historical Dracula, a perfectly serviceable tale distinguished by the author's own on-the-scene research in Romania. *Summer Sketches* is a too-slender but valuable lesson in writers and writing. It's a compilation including journal entries, pen-and-ink sketches, and the eventual scenes from the author's fiction that resulted. But the real Simmons prize is *The Hollow Man*, an novel with both SF and horror currents flowing through it. It's an ambitious departure for the ever-restless Simmons writing sensibility. It's the best novel I read all year. Peter Straub and Dean Koontz have novels coming up in 1993.

Dell Abyss completed another year with another dozen paperback originals, and inaugurated their hardback line with Poppy Z. Brite's *Lost Souls*. Brite's novel is a courageously ambi-sexual vampire odyssey, with a brilliantly coruscating surface. Other high points at Abyss included Kathe Koja's horrific exploration of brain damage, *Bad Brains*, Melanie Tem's multi-generational werewolf saga, *Wild-*

ing, and Tanith Lee's edgy plunge into the Gothic, *Dark Dance*.

In the specialty press field, one of the great nerve-wracking events is the continuing implosion of the Pulphouse Publishing empire. I believe the company's going to continue, though downsized, but there have been wide cuts in the magazines, the Short Story Paperbacks, and the Axolotl Press novellas. Other smaller publishers are still moving ahead, though. CD Publications started its line of hardbacks with Ed Gorman's collection, *Prisoners*, and *The Definitive Best of The Horror Show*. John Betancourt continued to publish an incredible variety of titles at Wildside Press and its affiliates; and Tom Monteleone published Joe Lansdale's *Captured by the Engines*, the latest *Borderlands*, and other titles at *Borderlands Press*. Stanislas Tal cranked up his chapbook line and published a nice selection of titles by Lucy Taylor, Elizabeth Massie, and Edward Lee. Doug and Tomi Lewis's Roadkill Press put out another half-dozen titles by such as Wayne Allen Sallee, Nancy Holder, Joe R. Lansdale, Norman Partridge, and yours truly. The Partridge collection, *Mr. Fox*, is a full-sized trade paperback and showcases the best

and brightest of all the brand-new writers.

In audio, Richard Sutphen's Spine-Tingling Press marketed a wonderful selection of six audio albums showcasing Kris Rusch, Ronald Kelly, Joe Citro, Matthew Costello, Kevin Anderson, and David Silva. Deep in the heart of Texas, the Gonzo Tapes did the same thing in one multi-volume album with Joe R. Lansdale, Neal Barrett, Jr., and Howard Waldrop.

Besides *Borderlands*, some of the original anthologies to check out were Dennis Etchison's *Meta-horror* and Skipp and Spector's *Still Dead*. A couple novels that weren't quite at the top of their writers' respective form, but still ahead of most of the competition, were *Wolfflow* by K.W. Jeter and *Chiller* by Randall Boyll. One of the most unaccountably overlooked novels was Wayne Allen Sallee's *Holy Terror*, a very brave book in its dealing with horror and the handicapped. Finally I'll mention a neat little art book with minimal text: Nick Bantock's *Sabine's Notebook*. This is one of the most sinister romances ever.

Now let's take a lengthier look at two of 1992's best, and one of 1993's top attractions.

Clive Barker continues to be one of the pre-eminent literary shamans for our time, constantly disassembling himself as a writer and then magically coming back together as a form of storyteller we perhaps did not suspect he was capable of becoming. Filmmaker, playwright, artist, and author; he has tackled all those endeavors with a real measure of success. In the dark fantasy field, he started (and is it only eight years ago?) with the six-volume *Books of Blood*,

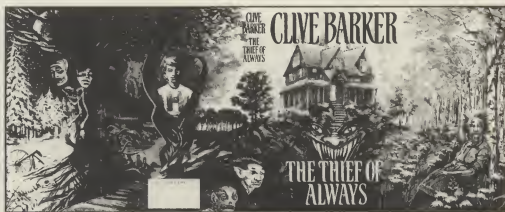
quickly garnering a large and enthusiastic following. But then his rabid following in leather, studs, and exotic haircuts were obliged to evolve at a much faster rate than, say, their similar fellows over at Annie Rice's camp. Barker was suddenly weaving huge, complex tapestries such as *Imajica*, *The Great and Secret Show*, and, indeed, *Weaveworld* itself. Here were fantasy epics that still included the nastier, darker, more violent elements that had endeared *Books of Blood* to the initial audience. The canvases were broader, the balance of disturbing aspects under surer control, but the magic was still there. And now, here's another phase in the kaleidoscopic Barker career.

The Thief of Always (Harper-Collins, \$20, 228pp) is labeled "a fable" on its front jacket; inside, it's referred to by the publisher as "a magical book for all ages." Safe enough. And perhaps understating the truth of the situation. But still essentially true. What it

Bradbury with razored edges, *Something Wicked This Way Comes* with even more jagged teeth.

The book's about a ten-year-old boy named Harvey Swick (and be sure to check out the author's photograph, taken when Barker himself was ten). It's a gray, dismal February and Harvey's bored to tears. Thus he becomes the perfect mark when the mysterious short person, Rictus, appears one night. Rictus offers Harvey the chance to visit Mr. Hood's Holiday House, a presumably wonderful distraction and vacation. Harvey, being suffering both boyhood ennui and being something of a cocksure young lad, accepts.

When Harvey's conducted to Holiday House, he finds it a rambling old Victorian set behind a wall of mist somewhere, mysteriously, still in the city. He is welcomed by Mrs. Griffin, the ancient cook and housekeeper, as well as by the three cats, Blue-Cat, Stew-Cat, and Clue-Cat. He also meets two other children, Lulu, who's



also is, is a thorough-going delight of a tale.

This is a slim book, a healthy novella fleshed out with liberal layout and plenty of Barker's own black and white illustrations. But *The Thief of Always* does not stint on storytelling. It satisfies. Though distinctively Barker, if I were to compare this writing with anyone's, it would be with early Bradbury. *The Thief of Always* is

been there for quite some time, and Wendell, a later arrival. Harvey also comes to meet Rictus's fellows, others of Mr. Hood's minions: Jive, Marr, and Carna. Marr has the power to help Harvey change into the shape of his choice. And Carna, it becomes apparent later, is the enforcer. All in all, Rictus and company are a somewhat less obviously terrifying version of Barker's cenobites.

All Harvey's favorite foods are served at Holiday House, there is plenty to do, lots of games to play, and a constant carousel of holidays all needing to be celebrated appropriately. At Halloween, for instance, Harvey's expressed wish comes true and Marr transforms him into a fearsome, flying, blood-lusting vampire. Cool.

Ah, but wait. As you've doubtlessly guessed, as in any good fairy tale, there's a problem or two lurking in the darkness. Harvey's not a dummy, and he starts to tumble to the fact that Holiday House and the mysterious Mr. Hood's hospitality are gift horses that really ought to be looked in the mouth. There are some nasty fangs there.

So Harvey plots an escape, only to find that much, much more remains to be done by an intelligent, resourceful, brave boy who is getting an object lesson in friendship, betrayal, responsibility, and the nature of reality and self-delusion. After all, what does he really want? And what illusions must he strip away?

The Thief of Always is as ultimately didactic as any other classic fairy tale. Yet Barker manages to leaven the content with a tremendously entertaining vehicle. This book is affable and fast-moving, funny and occasionally disturbing. Barker's own artwork is some of his best and perfectly fits the text.

This is, indeed, a delight for all ages.

The sub-genre of lycanthropic fiction has never had a werewolf novel to match the position of *Dracula* over in the vampire lair. The closest in the ballpark's probably Robert Lewis Stevenson's "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde." The strongest imprint's been in film, with Lon Chaney's Larry Talbot from Universal's *Wolfman* pictures in the 'thirties. Not that that's stopped

writers from trying for the furry crown.

Remember H. Warner Munn's *The Werewolf of Ponkert*, Jessie Kerruish's *The Undying Monster*, Guy Endore's *The Werewolf of Paris*? All highly regarded, all largely forgotten. In an arbitrarily chosen modern period starting with Jack Williamson's *Darker Than You Think*, we've recently seen such interesting attempts as *Wilderness* by Dennis Danvers, *St. Peter's Wolf* by Michael Cadnum, Robert R. McCammon's *The Wolf's Hour*, and Amanda Prantera's *Strange Loop*. The Cadnum novel is especially notable. And now here's another werewolf novel demanding considerable attention, *Wilding* (Abyss, \$4.99, 332pp) by Melanie Tem.

After her first novel, *Prodigal*, Melanie Tem ascended to the top rung of visibility at Dell Abyss books. Then *Blood Moon* was published nearly invisibly in Great Britain. Now there's *Wilding*, and I think it's going to get a lot of notice everywhere.

First, it's got all the bells and whistles going for it. *Wilding* is a perfect title for a lycanthropic dark fantasy, evoking, as it does, all manner of levels of meaning. Then there's the cover by Paul Clift, one of the most attention-getting and attractive of the sometimes all too muddy and toothy Abyss packages.

Second, and more important, *Wilding* has good writing and a first-rate writer's story-telling sensibility going for it. I'm not about to claim that *Wilding* is or will be the finest werewolf novel ever written. That's what the test of time is for. But what I will say is that *Wilding* is one of the top echelon of shapeshifting tales and is certainly one of the most impressive novels of the year. It's also an act of reassurance. *Prodigal* got a positive response from the readers and was a wonderful debut. *Blood Moon* had actually been written long before most of the rest of Tem's published material. So *Wilding* was the true

test of whether the author could beat the old sophomore curse. It certainly does.

Wilding is a multigenerational family saga about a matriarchal clan of werewolves living in contemporary Colorado. They are descended from four shapeshifting sisters who migrated west better than a century ago. The quartet built four massive brick houses in one of the oldest sections of north Denver. Two sisters are now dead, murdered by their siblings, bones stored down in the basements of their houses. The two survivors are Mary and Hannah. Mary's the city wolf. Hannah's the country wolf, spending most of her time with her extended family-pack in the high country of the Colorado mountains. The sisters are immensely patient, jockeying for power, and planning for the moment when one will die, one will triumph, and there will be a lone wolf bitch at the top.

We meet several generations of female werewolves. (Males don't play a role in this variant lupine world. Men are necessary evils for impregnation. Boy babies meet early, fatal fates.) Mary, as I say, is the matriarch. She lives for power and the sustenance and continuance of her clan. Mary's surviving daughter is Ruth, a woman both wise and strong. Ruth's daughter is Lydia, a woman who shys from her heritage, a lonely, estranged woman who does not want to assume her lycanthropic heritage. And Lydia's daughter is Deborah, a fifteen-year-old anorectic who is rebelling against the family with her purple mohawk, her punk persona with the attendant piercings and self-mutilations. Deborah is also pregnant, and at the moment of her family initiation, rebels and flees into Denver's urban street-level wilderness. She learns to kill. She finds a strange friend and ally in the person of a street-denizen named Julian. And always around her, though not al-

ways visible to Deborah, are the maneuverings and machinations of her family.

Tem structures this tale as an ensemble piece, so that roughly equal amounts of time and space are allotted to all the four primary characters. This is one of those auctorial risks that succeeds or fails depending upon who in the cast the reader wishes to empathize with the most. I think the risk largely pays off, though I have my own feelings about whom I'd like to have seen a lot more of.

There's a lot of pain included in the emotional loading here, and it's more frequently cold than hot, if one wants to use that particular scale for rating passion. Rather than putting the reader off, I think the net effect is a continual low-level reminder to the reader that these characters are not wholly human. They, by their nature, are partitioned off from the mainstream of human existence.

And that leads to another fascinating aspect of *Wilding*. Running some risk of being misunderstood, I must observe that this is very much of a woman's novel. I mean that in the sense that the characters, with Julian's minor exception, are female. Their lives as portrayed in *Wilding* are linked by cycles and biological ritual. Fierce lineal loyalty and family continuance are central to their experience. And blood is not a Big Deal.

How will this affect the audience? Female and male readers, I think, will enjoy *Wilding* equally. But more women than men will get a little more out of what Tem has wrought. There will be a bonus for readers whose life-experience is slightly closer to the core of the book. And as for guys, well, only the most superficial macho dude will miss the conspicuously lacking car chases. And all the others will get a few provocative insights to think about.

My only dissatisfactions with

Wilding are small concerns. I'm not sure Tem has quite visualized all the geography of her book—but then I live in the neighborhood she delineates too. I also miss context. The background of the werewolves is covered in an early paragraph—I'd like to see a little more of what past has formed this extended family of predators. And then there's the matter of this novel giving a sudden sharp signal at the end that the story isn't over yet. But for that, I guess I should just be patient and wait for the sequel. And maybe when the rest of the shapeshifters' family saga is told, maybe then Dracula will have a solid counterpart over in the lupine den.

To some degree, Dean Koontz's new novel reminds me of Stephen King's *Needful Things*. Both works are, it strikes me, compendiums of some of the authors' favorite story elements. *Dragon Tears* (Putnam, \$22.95, 384pp)—Koontz's title comes from a quoted Asian maxim: "Sometimes life can be as bitter as dragon tears. But whether dragon tears are bitter or sweet depends entirely on how each man perceives the taste"—contains, among many other elements, a pair of tough, resourceful cops, one male, one female; a depraved killer with extraordinary powers; an endangered child; a mysterious and imperiled invalid; and a talking dog (well, sort of).

Not that the plot is tired. This is one of Koontz's good ones. It hits the ground running at the very first and doesn't slack off for close to 200 pages. Several plot strands are presented immediately, ready for the author to plait. Southern California detective Harry Lyon finds himself in a shoot-out with a crazed, motiveless killer. His partner, Connie Gulliver, meanwhile, has been bombarding him with news clips of contemporary atrocities, evidence of what she calls "the pre-millennium cotillion." It's a lovely, evocative phrase, one of the

author's best. Even as this is going on, a homeless, coke-burnt, former ad-man is threatened with hideous death by a golem-like creature formed of rats. So are a homeless woman and her young son. And a frail, blind, institutionalized woman is visited by an utterly sinister presence.

Harry and Connie rapidly find themselves on the hit-list of someone—or something—with appalling superhuman powers. The killer is utterly sociopathic in his behavior, has psychotic plans for the world itself, is a pyrotic who has also mastered telekinesis, and, as a fillip, can cause time itself to halt. He's also a pathological junk-food junkie and a consummate narcissist. Clearly he's a worthy adversary for the police officers. Harry and Connie eventually discover they have only hours before they will be killed, along with the other designated victims. The author ably uses his version of the old Hitchcock ticking clock to crank up suspense.

Koontz does some interesting things with the novel. Without overdoing the effect, he allows his morality play to unspool as a contemporary fairy tale, occasionally noting the southern California equivalents of trolls, enchanted cottages, and—yes—talking animals. What he's apparently trying for is a contemporary version of a tale the Brothers Grimm might have set in western Europe as the first millennium A.D. was about to end and social madness was building. *Dragon Tears* is not, it seems, a terribly optimistic book. Individual battles can indeed be won, but the author seems to suggest that these may be isolated victories in an increasingly psychotic time.

Dragon Tears also has something of a just-say-no agenda attached. Without explicitly giving away any crucial plot revelations, the villain's origin does have to do with drug abuse in those wild, hedonistic, less-than-admirable 'six-

ties. It's a bit in the same vein as Stephen King's *Firestarter*, only much less sympathetic. Call it the evil flip-side of the coin. Late in the book, Koontz gives the readers a vicarious visit to that recent pop-culture favorite, the warehouse-venued rave. Connie and Harry exchange something of a diatribe about the evils of Ecstasy and nitrous oxide. Nitrous as a deadly underminer of our society?

There's no mention of such other rave faves as alcohol and smart-drinks. The tone's encapsulated by this description of "... a raven-haired girl of twenty, whose slender arms were raised above her head in one of those rapturous expressions of the joy that rhythmic movement and primitive driving music could sometimes bring to a dancer even without the assistance of drugs." One gathers that

the author is not presently a rock 'n' roller.

Whether Dean Koontz gets a kick out of G 'n' R or Metallica is, of course, immaterial. What should be said is that *Dragon Tears* rocks along just fine; indeed, steamrolls across the pages. This is certainly Dean Koontz's most entertaining novel in years.

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THE "MASTER OF HORROR'S OPENING LINES" QUIZ

A.R. Morlan

Since the publication of his first novel, *Carrie*, in 1974, Stephen King has reigned as the undisputed master of the horror novel for close to twenty years; his books are all still in print, still in stores and book club brochures (heck, the man has his *own* book club, which sells nothing but his books!), still read by his millions of fans . . . *but* if you weren't allowed to touch any of your Stephen King novels, could you still remember how each of them *began*? What follows are fifteen opening lines from some of King's most famous books (collections and the *Dark Tower* series excluded, and as far as that Bachman fellow is concerned, he can go write his own quiz, plus *Christine*—which contained that name in the opening line . . . since when have I let you off *that* easy?), plus the titles and publication dates of the books themselves. You know the rules, match the title to the line . . . if you dare (heh, heh!).

SCORING: Under five correct: First, you *buy* the book, then you *open* the book, and then you *read* the book . . . Six to ten correct: You're able to tell those telesalesmen hawking King's book club that you've already got most of those titles. Eleven to fourteen correct: You must've borrowed that heart of a small boy from the jar on his desk! Fifteen: How long *have* you been at this job, Stephen?

THE BOOKS:


1. *Carrie* (1974)
2. *Salem's Lot* (1975)
3. *The Shining* (1977)
4. *The Stand* (1978)
(original edited version)
5. *The Dead Zone* (1979)
6. *Firestarter* (1980)
7. *Cujo* (1981)
8. *The Talisman* (1984)
(co-written with Peter Straub)
9. *IT* (1986)
10. *Misery* (1987)
11. *The Tommyknockers* (1987)
12. *The Dark Half* (1989)
13. *The Stand* (1990)
(complete and uncut version)
14. *Needful Things* (1991)
15. *Gerald's Game* (1992)

QUIZ ANSWERS

C 8 N 5I
 K 7 H 1A
 E 9 V 6I
 J 5 O 7I
 T 4 I 1I
 B 3 C 0I
 D 2 M 6
 L 1 C 8

THE QUOTES:

- A. "Sally."
- B. Jack Torrance thought: *Officious little prick.*
- C. *umber whunnnnn*
yerrrrnnn umber whunnnnn
fayunnnnn
These sounds; even in the haze.
- D. Almost everyone thought the man and boy were father and son.
- E. "Daddy, I'm tired," the little girl in the red pants and the green blouse said fretfully.
- F. By the time he graduated from college, John Smith had forgotten all about the bad fall he took on the ice that January day in 1953.
- G. On September 15th, 1981, a boy named Jack Sawyer stood where the water and the land came together, hands in the pockets of his jeans, looking out at the steady Atlantic.
- H. You've been here before.
- I. For want of a nail the kingdom was lost—that's how the catechism goes when you boil it down.
- J. News item from the Westover (Me.) weekly *Enterprise*, August 19, 1966: RAIN OF STONES REPORTED
- K. Once upon a time, not so long ago, a monster came to the small town of Castle Rock, Maine.
- L. Hapscomb's Texaco sat on US 94 just north of Arnette, a pissant four-street burg about 110 miles from Houston.
- M. The terror, which would not end for another twenty-eight years—if it ever did end—began, so far as I know or can tell, with a boat made from a sheet of newspaper floating down a gutter swollen with rain.
- N. Jessie could hear the back door banging lightly, randomly, in the October breeze blowing around the house.



BOB MORRISH INTERVIEWS ROADKILL PRESS

SPOTLIGHT ON PUBLISHING

Up to this point, this column has focused on notable small press publishers of horror-oriented hardcovers. This time around though, we're going to take a look at a publisher who specializes in an economical alternative (both for the publisher and the customer) — namely chapbooks.

Chapbooks are slim (typically 20 to 60 pages), saddle-stitched, digest-sized booklets. In the horror genre, chapbooks are usually illustrated, signed, and numbered, and produced on high-quality paper. When created with care, the resulting chapbook is an impressive, yet relatively inexpensive (typically \$5 to \$15) product.

There's been a recent boom in horror chapbooks, a trend that can seemingly be traced back to Footsteps Press' efforts in that form in the mid-to-late '80s. Footsteps published several signed, limited chapbooks, featuring names such as Harlan Ellison, Richard Matheson, and F. Paul Wilson. However, Footsteps' output has tailed off in recent years, and, in recent months, more and more publishers have jumped on the chapbook bandwagon, publishers such as Crossroads, Deadline, and Bump In The Night.

Roadkill Press has been at the forefront of this post-Footsteps

wave, in terms of both initial publication date (the summer of 1990) and prolificity (seventeen chapbooks published in only about thirty months of operation). Roadkill Press is operated by Doug Lewis and his wife Tomi, who are also the owners of Denver area bookstore, The Little Bookshop Of Horrors. In fact, Roadkill Press was actually a consequence of the opening of The Little Bookshop, as Doug Lewis explains . . .

CEMETERY DANCE: How did you first get involved in book-selling?

ROADKILL PRESS: It came from my being unable to find certain small press books. Most ordinary bookstores, even Tattered Covers [a major Denver area bookstore], didn't carry Dark Harvest books or Scream/Press books. One title in particular that I was looking for was *The Nightrunners* [by Joe Lansdale]—I saw a review of it in the newspaper, which at least gave me the address for Dark Harvest. From that point, the specialty presses became very interesting to me, and . . . it was actually my wife's idea to pursue the retail bookstore idea.

We're out here on the edge of Denver, quite off the beaten path,

because the rent's cheap. And that's kind of what started us on the publishing path, too, because we had to think of ways to get people to come out to see us, and we started having readings by some local authors.

CD: When did you open the store?

RP: 1989, three years from this past Halloween.

CD: Did you consider trying to build a mail order business rather than deal with the headaches of a retail outlet?

RP: It seemed like there were already quite a few mail order booksellers who were doing quite a good job. I just thought that we would stand a better chance by getting into the full retail business.

CD: You mentioned that you got into publishing as a consequence of the in-store readings — was publishing something that you had in mind before you opened the store?

RP: No, we had no visions whatsoever of getting into publishing. We started the series of readings the following summer [1990]; we started with Connie Willis in June, and then Simon Hawke, and then

the third reading we featured both Gary Jonas and Ronnie Seagren. In every six-month series of readings, we usually have two authors who are fairly new to the scene, and we've dubbed those readings the "New Voices."

When we had Ronnie and Gary, Ronnie already had a couple of stories published, but Gary hadn't — even though he had had a couple of sales by then, they hadn't been published yet. Up until that reading, we had had plenty of books available for customers to have signed after the readings [by Willis and Hawke], but with Gary, that was the first time when there wouldn't be anything available [to be signed]. So we thought it was a possibility that we would publish something. I'd seen Footsteps Press chapbooks, and was impressed with them, although I thought they were a bit pricey. We wanted to do something similar to that, but with a price in the range of a typical paperback. We thought that the people who came to the reading would appreciate it and would support the author; would show that they enjoyed the reading.

CD: So your first book was a Gary Jonas title?

RP: Yes, it was Gary's *By Death Abused*, illustrated by Timothy Standish. Later on, we started doing "New Voices Doubles," with both of the "New Voices" included in one book.

CD: And the readings are scheduled when — every other month?

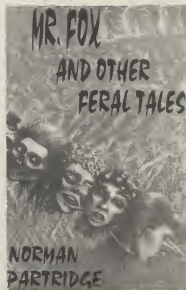


Doug and Tomi Lewis

RP: Every month, on the third Wednesday of the month. Because the readings have developed a fairly consistent audience of between 25 and 50 people — the exception being when Dan Simmons comes — we kind of have a ready-built market when we release a chapbook [at a reading].

CD: Has everyone you've published been in for a reading at your store?

RP: Yes. It's not really a requirement, it's just worked out that way. We would encourage any authors who would like to do a reading — if they're going to be in the area — to



let us know and we'll try to set up a reading. And with enough advance notice, we'll try to do a chapbook to coincide with the reading.

CD: I know that many of the authors you've published are Colorado residents, but there are some who obviously aren't. In the case of someone like Wayne Allen Sallee or Kath

Koja [who was scheduled for a chapbook that was later canceled], do you schedule it so that they'll be there for a reading when you release the chapbook?

RP: Kathie would have been the first exception; she had no plans to come down for a reading. It isn't a requirement at all [that the authors be there]. We were going to send Kathie signature pages and then have them bound into the books. We've developed quite a mail order clientele — to the point that we sell most of our copies through the mail now — so the authors don't have to be here for a reading. For example, with Ed Bryant's recent chapbook, we had a good turn-out for the reading and sold about 35 copies that night. We'll probably sell two hundred through the mail over the next few months.

CD: I was just going to ask you that — so you do get the majority of your sales through the mail then.

RP: Yes, and what started that was Dan Simmons' *Banished Dreams* — that really put us on the map for mail order customers. That was the second chapbook we did, and it was basically his idea to sell it for the same price as Gary's book. He

didn't think it would be appropriate for his book to cost a lot more.

CD: *Banished Dreams* has gone on to become quite a prized possession. Your first edition of that chapbook consisted of how many copies?



RP: Three hundred.

CD: And I've noticed that those are now going for quite "obscene" prices in the collector's market.

RP: Yeah, and it seemed obscene to me shortly after it was published. I saw several [chapbooks] that we had sold to dealers — and we had told these dealers that the book was still in print, and that people could still buy them from us for \$3 — but the dealers were already listing them for \$35. I've seen them as high as \$125 now, which is just amazing to me. I guess I should be flattered, but it's not what we were aiming to do when we published it.

CD: And how big of a second printing [which was not signed by Simmons] did you do for that book?

RP: I think it was around 1,000. We're down to about one box left of them. It's been a consistent seller, and again, we tried to keep

the price down. The other book of Dan's which we did [a collection of three after-dinner convention speeches, entitled *Going After The Rubber Chicken*] — which wasn't a signed, limited edition — we also did about 1,000 copies of. Those are almost gone now, too.

CD: Besides the Simmons books, have you had any other particularly fast sellers?

RP: The Joe Lansdale books, especially *Far Side of The Cadillac Desert*. Both of them have done quite well [the other Lansdale title being *Step-pin' Out, Summer, '68*]. And the Nancy Collins book [*The Tortuga Hill Gang's Last Ride*] has also sold quite well. Also, the third book that we did — *Man Of the Future* by Ed Bryant — sold out almost as fast as the first edition of *Banished Dreams* did, since it [the Bryant book] was illustrated and signed by Simmons. It was Ed's idea to ask Dan to illustrate the book, and we got him to sign them all, and it went out of print shortly after *Banished Dreams*.

CD: Have you ever considered trying other types of publishing — I know that *Going After The Rubber Chicken* was, technically-speaking, a trade paperback, since it was perfect-bound — but have you considered publishing more trade paperbacks, or even hardcovers?

RP: I've talked to a few people about the feasibility. It's something that we would like to do in the future, but we have to tackle the financial end of it first. We were real happy with how *Going After The Rubber Chicken* turned out, and also with the Norm Partridge collection, *Mr. Fox and Other Feral Tales*, which was also a perfect-bound, trade paperback-type book. But perfect-binding does add almost fifty cents a book to the cost of production, and when you're talking about doing four or five hundred books, that's a fair

amount of extra money. There's not as much profit in our books as there maybe is for other publishers, because we split the profits evenly with the author. By doing that, the majority of our books have returned pro rates [for the author]. But by doing that, we haven't built up enough cash to start a hardcover project. And sales at the bookstore have been kind of recessionary.

CD: How many books have you published to date?

RP: I was counting them earlier, and I think we have 17, plus one broadsheet — which is probably the most under-publicized thing we've done. It was a short story by Vance Aandahl, illustrated by Brian Cooper, and we did it on the order of Lord John Press's broadsheets. We only printed a hundred, but it was so costly to ship — we tried to ship them flat and it was just really expensive.

CD: You mentioned that you've printed as many as a thousand copies of a couple of your titles, and



you just mentioned only doing a hundred of the broadsheets — as far as the chapbooks go, what's the smallest print run you've had?

RP: We only did one hundred cop-

ies of the first book, Gary Jonas' *By Death Abused*. And I think that the first "New Voices" double we did was two hundred copies.

CD: I would expect that your newer, less-renowned authors — Gary Jonas, Pamela Jessen, perhaps even Norm Partridge — don't sell as well as your more established authors. Do you find that to be the case?

RP: Oh, sure. But I think that's part of what makes us feel good about what we do — acquainting

How has Partridge's collection been selling for you?

RP: Quite well. It got a lot of really good press, and . . . I'd say we're down to less than two hundred copies left.

CD: How many of your titles are out of print?

RP: Probably about . . . a third of them.

CD: How do you typically choose something to publish these days —

pretty full, but we're always open to new suggestions.

CD: How do you choose the artists for your projects?

RP: Up until the first Joe Lansdale chapbook, we were using Timothy Standish, who I think is a very talented artist, and he also worked great within our deadlines. But then Joe asked if he could use Mark Nelson, who had done the illustrations for his *Magic Wagon* limited edition, and who was doing some work in the comics with him. So we



A recent signing at Little Bookshop of Horrors. (Left to right) Lucy Taylor, Doug Lewis, Steve Rasnic Tem, Tomi Lewis, and Melanie Tem

people with some lesser-known and less-established writers. I've noticed that most of the other chapbook publishers are only announcing titles by "big names," and we're proud that we've done a mix of familiar and unfamiliar names.

CD: The Partridge title, in particular, should be of interest to *CD* readers, since Norm has had a couple of stories appear in these pages.

do you get unsolicited manuscripts?

RP: We do, and I'm hoping that this interview might prompt a few more. We do try and encourage authors to let us know if they're going to be in the area — that's what we'd most like to do, set up a reading with them. And then we can talk about doing chapbooks as well.

Right now, our schedule is

went away from Tim for that one. And then with Wayne's book, he suggested that we talk to Alan Clark, and we've been really happy working with Alan. And then, recently, we were able to find a local artist, Melissa Sherman, through Dan Simmons.

CD: What are your most recent titles and what do you have scheduled for the future?

RP: We did Joe Lansdale's *Steppin' Out, Summer, '68* in August. Joe was up here and did a reading for that. Then . . . Nancy Holder was in the area because she's collaborating with [local resident] Melanie Tem on a novel for *Abyss*. Since Nancy was here we did her *Cannibal Dwight* book. And then Ed Bryant's *Darker Passions* just came out last week; it has an original story and two reprints, so it's kind of like a mini-collection.

Coming up, we have several more projects with Joe Lansdale. Joe's constantly coming up with more ideas. We're going to be doing an Andrew Vachss chapbook, which incorporates a short story, called "Drive by," which has also had a treatment done by Joe for Dark Horse comics. We're going to run both versions: Andrew's story and then Joe's more-or-less "screenplay." That should be out sometime after the first of the year; it'll be illustrated by Mark Nelson. And . . . the other thing . . . it's not past talking stages, but there's a possibility of another chapbook by Nancy Collins in March.

CD: Is there anyone in particular who you haven't published yet — and don't have scheduled — that you'd really love to publish?

RP: Right off the bat, I'm coming up blank, hmm . . . a "big name" who I've been really impressed with is Robert McCammon. I'd love to do something by him. Given a little more time, I'm sure I'd be able to come up with some more names.

CD: Where would you like to see Roadkill Press two or three years from now?

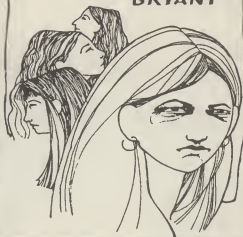
RP: I haven't really thought about it too much . . . I would like to have a couple of hardcover single-author collections out, and maybe an anthology of stories by previous Roadkill authors. But still, we'll probably be mainly focusing on the chapbooks, maybe going a little more towards the mini-collections, with three stories or something like that. And continuing to emphasize newer writers.

♦ ♦

ROADKILL PRESS

DARKER PASSIONS

EDWARD BRYANT



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—Dan Simmons
from the introduction.

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Banished Dreams by Dan Simmons (Reprint)	\$4.00
<small>All chapbooks except <i>Banished Dreams</i> & <i>Rubber Chicken</i> are signed & limited.</small>	
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EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

EDWARD LEE

EDWARD LEE is starting to show up all over the place — no surprise there! *Coven* and *Succubi* continue to draw good press as darkly humorous and erotic horror novels, his short stories are beginning to surface in many of the genre's magazines and anthologies, and a new deluxe chapbook from TAL Publications, *Edward Lee's Quest For Sex, Truth and Reality*, is currently available. "Equal Opportunity" — a very grim tale, indeed — is Lee's second CD appearance.

I get them on the road, it's easy.

They always fall for it.

My sister died when she was nine. It was my father, and Uncle Chuck, and my step-brother, Luke, who was just out of high school. As they say, boys will be boys. They didn't know I saw; I was watching through the crack in Jeannie's bedroom door. Of course, I didn't really know what was going on — shit, I was only four. But you remember things. Even that young, certain things will always stick in your brain. I see it every day, when I close my eyes. I see it every time I open the newspaper or turn on the tv.

I see it every night when I go to sleep.

Jeannie bled to death right there on the bed. You should've seen the three of them standing there: naked, dumbfounded hayseeds. Their pubic hair looked like clumps of rusted steel wool, from all the blood. Luke scratched his head. "Shit, daddy, we sure done it this time. Just like that little creeker chick we busted up last summer." "For God's sake, Chuck! Do something!" my father yelled. Well, Uncle Chuck did something, all right. He was the county coroner, and he doctored the cause of death on the birth cert. Small town, old ways — you know. Naturally, the police never asked questions 'cos my father was the chief of police.

With Jeannie gone, they broke me in right away. I've read about it in books and magazines. Conative

Subliminal Pedophile Suggestion, it's called. Formative Hypnosis. When kids are between three and seven, they're highly susceptible to adult influence. "It's Sleepytime, Anna," they'd whisper when they came in at night. "This is what grown-ups do to show good little girls that they love them." "You're such a good little girl," my father would say while he was doing it. "Good little girls get nice things for Christmas. You make me and Uncle Chuck and Luke feel so good, just like a good little girl."

For years, it went on like this.

But it's not just me, is it? Isn't it really *history*? That's all they been doing, for the last hundred centuries. Using us, lying to us.

Raping us.

But I can laugh about it now. Thank God, I can finally feel good about something again.

When I was thirteen, I had to go to the hospital. My father told me I had to have my appendix out, but it was nothing to worry about. "It won't hurt a bit, honey," he promised. Years later, though, when I was in high school, I heard them talking about it while they were drinking beer and watching football. There was nothing wrong with my appendix — they got me pregnant. One of Chuck's pals at the county hospital gave me an abortion and cut my tubes. That way Chuck and dad and Luke wouldn't have to worry about knocking me up anymore. They could just shoot it all right up into my dead womb and not give a shit.

Yeah, they could have themselves a good ol' time.

Luke died in the war. There was a big hero's funeral, and my father cried. Years later, when I began to really see, I went to the cemetery one night and pissed on the grave.

And as for my father and Uncle Chuck . . .

Well, no one'll ever find the bodies.

And they'll never find any of the others, either. I'm a strong woman, and I dig deep.



But I take them someplace first. There's this old barn right off the county highway, and this old utility road no one knows about . . .

Men think they're so tough, so superior. But you should see them when I get the gun in their faces, the babies piss their pants if I tell them to. They rarely even put up a fight—they think it's a joke. Well, once I get them shackled down to that old cartbed in the barn, then I show them a real joke.

I've got all kinds of neat stuff I keep in the trunk. Flensing knives, scratch awls, electric prods. Vise-Grips for fingers and toes. Carpet razors for nailbeds. Oh, and I got this great cordless power drill for knees

and ankles and elbows.

I always save the shingle-shears for last.

And when they're screaming, I think of Jeannie. I think of my father and Luke and Uncle Chuck. And I think of all the other women in the world who are just like me. It's like equal time, you know? Equal opportunity.

Yeah, I get them on the road. They always fall for it. Once I turn on the cruiser's red and blues, they always pull over.

— CD

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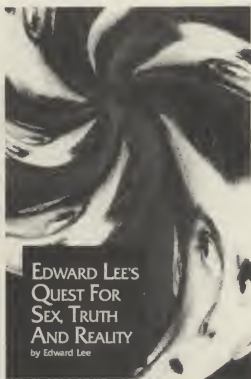
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Cemetery Dance

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A CONVERSATION WITH MELANIE TEM

STEFAN DZIEMIANOWICZ

In a very short span of time, Melanie Tem has managed to make a very big name for herself. Although visibly active in dark fantasy only since 1989 she has already produced three critically-acclaimed novels, including *Prodigal*, winner of the Bram Stoker Award in 1992 for outstanding achievement for a first novel. Alone, and in collaboration with her husband Steve Rasnic Tem, she has contributed short fiction to anthologies that include both *Women of Darkness* compilations, *Women of the West*, *Skin of the Soul*, *Post Mortem*, *Cold Shocks*, *Chilled to the Bone*, and most recently *Snow White*, *Blood Red*.

More impressive than her growing resume is the orientation of her fiction. Whether writing about a social worker who feeds on the suffering of his clients in *Prodigal* (Dell/Abyss, 1991), a young boy convinced he can cause events to happen simply by imagining them in *Blood Moon* (Women's Press, 1992), or a matriarchal extended family in which the women express emotions through shape-shifting in *Wilding* (Dell/Abyss, 1992), Tem reveals the psyches of her human characters to be more substantial grist for the macabre than horror's usual monsters. Her powerful character-driven stories have already garnered comparisons to the fiction of Shirley Jackson, and frustrated the attempts of

critics to define her work within the horror genre.

Although the winning of the Stoker award might be cause for some writers to pause and reflect, Melanie Tem is already embarked on a series of future projects. Among them is a series of genre-subverting erotic horror novels written in collaboration with Nancy Holder, the first of which, *Making Love*, is due to appear in August 1993; a three-novel contract with Dell/Abyss that includes the Spring 1994 release *Revenant*, a vampire-variant tale currently entitled *Desmodus*, and possibly a prequel to *Wilding*; her long-gestating project *There Be Dragons*, which will meld three different novels into a single mosaic relating the experience of grieving as a mythic hero's journey through the underworld; and the revision of three mainstream novels written several years ago. Such ambitious plans notwithstanding, Tem still holds down her day job as a professional social worker and lifetime career as a wife and mother of four.

CEMETERY DANCE: Although your mainstream publishing resume extends back about twenty years, the story that introduced most readers in the field to your work was "Aspen Graffiti," published in the first *Women of Darkness* anthology in 1988. When did you begin writing horror fiction?

MELANIE TEM: I don't think I write horror—with the possible exception of *Wilding*, which I don't think I can claim is not horror when it's about werewolves. Other than that, though, I don't think for the most part that I write horror fiction. I prefer the term dark fantasy. I know that there's a lot of discussion about what that term means, and that some people think it's affected, sort of precious, but I like it better.

I think that most people who write horror would say that the primary emotion they go for in their readers is fear. I'm not trying to frighten people. If anything, I guess I would say I try to disturb people, to shake up how people look at the world. Mostly, though, I write out of an impulse in myself to understand something I don't understand in human nature. That may be something dark, or it may not be. It may be just something mysterious that I don't understand. My mainstream stories, the first stories that I published, were not fantasy. They were much more realistic and straightforward, but I think they were written out of that same impulse.

I came to be publishing fantasy, or dark fantasy, or horror, or whatever, because I married Steve. We met in a writer's workshop and when we began reading each other's work I realized I had the same prejudice a lot of people have

about genre fiction in general: that you can't do anything serious with it, that it's all gimmicky. Steve taught me otherwise, and I began to see how much can be done by exploring important human themes through the genre.

CD: In a recently published interview, Steve said that one reason why he was attracted to the horror/dark fantasy mode was because it is a fiction that deals with transformation. Is this the same sort of interest it holds for you?

TEM: Yes, I'm very interested in transformation and transcendence. One of the things that interests me is how dark, disturbing experiences in our lives can transform us for the better, how we can come through those things. That's why I'm not really interested in horror stories where you go through everything with the character, only to reach a twist ending where the monster is still alive and going to come back. I always feel cheated reading that, I always feel "What was the point?" I like the idea of how we confront things, how we look at things. I think that the psychological truth of a lot of horror themes is that they're powerful when we don't confront them. They're powerful when they're hidden, or when they're secret. So I like the idea of the transformation and transcendence that happens when we face and deal with dark things.

CD: Does it bother you that at the

same time you're resisting being labeled, which I would think any writer would want to do, you've had to take on the horror/dark fantasy label in order to get your work into print?

TEM: I don't so much mind the labeling itself, because I don't mind being called a dark fantasy writer. My difficulty is that at least outside the field, to the general reading public, if I say that I write horror fiction, most of them won't

Morrison's book *Beloved*, which is a ghost story. It's a wonderful story, and it's never categorized as a ghost story. Also Joyce Carol Oates' family saga *Bellefleur*, a gothic novel with only a couple of touches of what you might call magic realism. One of the ancestors in the story is a vampire, and Oates just talks about this character in the same tone of voice as she would talk about any of the other ancestors. But no one calls *Bellefleur* Joyce Carol Oates' vampire novel. It would be nice to be a writer whose work is looked at as outside of categories, so that like *Beloved* your work is not marketed as a ghost story when it absolutely is one.

CD: Is the difference between what you call your mainstream fiction and your dark fantasy just a matter of lighter shading? I ask because the use of the supernatural in your work is generally so subtle, so ambiguous, it's hard to say clearly that something fantastic is going on.

TEM: Except in *Wilding*. That steps further into the non-arguable horror vein. In the stories that I consider my mainstream work I think anyone would be hard pressed to find a supernatural fantasy element at all. They're

pretty much straightforward, character-driven stories. But when I've gone back in the last few years to my old stories to see whether any of them can be resurrected and reworked, in some cases it has seemed very natural, and not at all opportunistic, to turn them into dark fantasy stories, without any

read it because they have preconceived ideas. When they hear "horror," they think "Freddy Kruger." That's why I think the horror label is misleading.

I suppose that at some point I will dislike the idea of *any* labels at all. I find myself kind of chuckling over a phenomenon such as Toni



stretching, as though that element had been there in the first place. So I wonder if I might have been thinking that way all along, without acknowledging it or knowing it, because of prejudice or ignorance of what could be done in the field.



CD: That's not surprising to hear. It's clear in all of your dark fantasy that human emotion is the central concern, and that the supernatural motifs are simply a vehicle for expressing those emotions, rather than the object of the stories.

TEM: I'm delighted to hear you say that, because that's the whole point. I'm very interested in how traditional horror motifs can express psychological truths; for example, how the werewolf expresses anger in *Wilding*.

Nancy Holder and I are collaborating on what we hope will be a series of erotic horror novels which very deliberately use standard horror motifs to talk about romantic love relationships. We've just finished a retelling of the *Frankenstein* story, which is about a woman who has never been able to find a man good enough for her, so she creates her own. We have a story that we'll write some time, we hope, using the werewolf theme to talk about a woman in a physically-abusive relationship. It just seems

to me that the supernatural/fantasy/horror/whatever images and motifs have all kinds of things to say to us about human experience.

CD: Do you find that using these supernatural motifs allows you to deal more easily with human emotions in your stories?

TEM: I don't know if "easily" is the right word. I think that the symbolism, which is a word I use with great care, or the metaphorical quality of horror themes and motifs, maybe lets me go farther.

CD: Could you elaborate on that? Do you mean that using horror motifs creates a safer, imaginary context in which it's easier to grapple with these emotions?

TEM: Again, I don't think "easier" is the right word. As I said before, one of the reasons I write is because there are things that I don't understand or that I'm curious about. I don't tend to write for therapy, but because I'm curious about things. The novel I'm working on now, *Revenant*, is a ghost story. It's not easier for me to write about loss, and about the difficulty of letting go of people we have lost, by using the idea of a ghost rather than writing about loss directly. But it's possible to talk about it differently and say more things.

I'm reminded always of the writer Jonathan Kellerman, a clinical child psychologist who also writes detective fiction. In his book *When the Bough Breaks*, which uses a child psychologist as the viewpoint character, he has that character muse that if we try to understand human nature solely on the basis of psychology, it's like trying to understand Shakespeare solely on the basis of how the lines scan. We miss something.

As a social worker, I'm trained to understand human nature fairly analytically, and with all kinds of theoretical background.

And I'm not denying the theoretical usefulness of that, but I think there are some things that cannot be understood directly, and I think that writing in general allows me access to things about the human experience that I can't get at directly. Writing metaphorically one way or the other—and right now it tends to be in the dark fantasy or horror field—allows me even wider access.

CD: This leads inevitably to the question of whether you feel your work as a social worker has had an impact on your writing, and if so how?

TEM: Well, the obvious answer, which I think is true, is that any part of one's life has an impact on every other part of one's life. So of course, yes. More specifically, I think, there are a couple of particular interactions between the two careers that make sense to me. One is that I went into social work probably for one of the same reasons why I write. And that is, again, to try to understand somebody whose life experience I don't have. Another is that social work brings one into contact with all kinds of stories that can be told. I have never written whole cloth about a particular client, but very often I will come into contact with someone, and something in my mind will say, "There's a story in that."

CD: Would that explain why so much of your fiction is based in very intimate human relationships: mother/daughter relationships, father/daughter relationships, sibling relationships. Essentially, all of your fiction uses the family as the context from which the story emerges. Is this a reflection of your professional experience?

TEM: I think it's more personal. I tend to live in the world on a microcosmic level. I'm a child of the

'60s. I went through that era's large-scale changing-the-world kind of perspective and have done my share of social action. In fact, my specific concentration in social work school was not clinical, but community services, the broader kind of scope. But in my personal life, and in both professions—social work and writing—I don't think like that anymore. There are lots of social questions I'm glad I don't have to make a decision about anymore. It used to be I thought I could make decisions, and that I wanted to make a difference on a social policy kind of level about things that mattered to me. But the older I get the more complex everything seems to me, and the less I am even willing to have an opinion about some of the more important social issues of our time, because I see things more and more and more microcosmically, how they affect people individually, day by day. So I think probably that intimacy in my writing comes from how I see the world, and how I live in it.

CD: Could you describe the genesis of each of the three novels you've published so far—*Prodigal*, *Blood Moon*, and *Wilding*. How each came to you, why you decided to write what you did, and also how each expands upon a standard genre motif. *Prodigal*, for example, has been described as a vampire novel—

TEM: I never thought of that until it was finished, by the way.

CD: That answers a question I had about whether you consciously choose motifs before you started writing, or simply find that as the story you're writing picks up impetus it begins to clarify itself in terms of a particular motif.

TEM: What would you say is the motif in *Blood Moon*?

CD: Telekinesis, or wild talents.

TEM: I never thought about that. You see, I don't read a lot of horror, so I actually hadn't thought about that, but you're right, the wild talent motif is what it uses.

CD: This is interesting, because it seems that in contrast to the work you're doing with Nancy Holder, in which you're going to try to expand or explore the possibilities of these motifs, it sounds as though for each of your three novels you weren't deliberately trying to do that.

TEM: *Prodigal* was written many years ago, so I can't remember exactly how it came about. Actually, *Blood Moon* was written before that, and it had a hard time selling, probably because it has the least "horror" of all my books, and people had a hard time categorizing it. In fact, Jeanne Cavelos at Abyss said she didn't want it because it's not horror. And Women's Press

lutely. In *Prodigal*, at least some of the genesis came, I think, from wanting to talk about someone who was supposed to be a helping person, but who in fact fed off of troubles and created problems when he was supposed to be helping. So mainly that book came from my social work experience, because there are a lot of social workers who do exactly that, although hardly as literally as the villain in *Prodigal*. In fact, there was a particular social worker who had been involved with our family, against whom this novel is my revenge, who did a lot of what Jerry did.

CD: Is there a conscious connection between *Prodigal* and "Lightning Rod," your story in Lisa Tuttle's *Skin of the Soul* anthology, which is about a mother who takes on the suffering of her children and thereby deprives them of the capacity to grieve and realize their full humanity?

TEM: Well, there's a connection. Our son died five years ago this March, and much of my writing about loss has to do with the grieving process because it's such a life changing event, and it can be absolutely transcendent and transforming. It has been for me. And "Lightning Rod" is the only story I can think of at the moment that was directly therapeutic for me to write, because at the time I was getting trapped into that exact position, feeling as though I didn't dare let Steve or the other children feel the pain, that it was my responsibility to protect them. And realizing not only how dangerous it was for me but how dangerous it was for them, yet not being able to stop it because that's what mothers do. This is an example of how by making the psychological/metaphorical truth of the story literal, it became therapeutic for me, because it did help me to get a handle on it.



doesn't consider it horror because they don't think they publish horror at all. It still hasn't sold in the states.

Both of those books grew, like most of my work, out of characters. In *Blood Moon* the character of Greg is what drives the novel, abso-

CD: How about *Wilding*?

TEM: *Wilding* came to me in a conversation one evening with Richard Curtis, my agent, discussing my "next project." I am not a writer who has problems with someone giving me advice about what I should write next because Richard never tries to say "I think you should write *this* story," when it's not something that occurred to me. He doesn't plan my career for me in that sense. And I said to him "I have this and this and this and this as ideas—which one should I do next in terms of career development?" And one of the ideas was a clan of werewolves, or vampires, or zombies, or something like that living in a city, and it would be a story focused on women. The idea in my mind was the interplay between the traditional kind of old-fashioned ideas of what one of those horror motifs would be, and daily life in a city. That was the genesis, and as we talked I got interested in the idea of werewolves and anger, womens' anger, womens' sexuality, and the violence inherent in the werewolf idea. So that story was, I suppose, still-character driven in a sense, but not as specifically driven by an individual character.

It's also the book or story that has most surprised me by what's there. After I finished the book, I thought, "This has no redeeming social value. I don't know why I wrote this book. I don't know what my point is here, and it's going to be embarrassing if anybody likes this book." So I sent it away, and Jeanne loved it, and Richard loved it. I read it in galleys and thought, "Well isn't this interesting, I didn't see *that* before." And that usually doesn't happen to me. So it was kind of a surprise.

CD: One of the more interesting aspects of your writing career is your work with Steve. You're one of the few couples who have suc-

cessful careers as writers in your own right, and as collaborators. It must be difficult for two writers, each of whom has developed a unique approach to writing, to work together.

TEM: No, it's not difficult at all. We have no difficulty collaborating. I think part of the reason may be that, just from the perspective of process, nothing by one of us leaves the house without the other having read it. Both of us edit each other's work, so in a sense we're always collaborating. The other thing is that while I think we have some important differences in our work—this is going to sound terribly hokey, but it's true—I think that the reason why our collaborations work is the same reason why our marriage works, and that is that we have the same way of living in the world, the same approach to life, and the same things that are important to us. Both of us tend to write character-driven work, both of us tend to think that human experience is the point of fiction. I think Steve's work tends to be darker than mine, on the whole, less upbeat. I like happy endings, or at least hopeful endings, and he doesn't, so we sometimes argue about that.

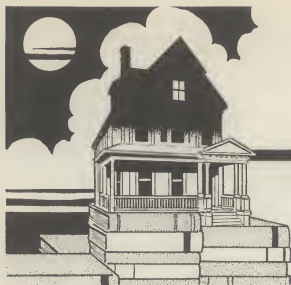
We've collaborated on a lot of different projects in addition to what everyone has already seen, including a high-fantasy novel called *Daughters* which so far hasn't found a publisher, and about half of a non-fiction book we would finish if anyone were interested.

CD: Steve has written quite eloquently in his essays about the therapeutic function of horror fiction. He says that horror fiction allows receptive readers to ponder the darkness inside all of us, and learn how to deal with it; not necessarily to be better persons but to be *fuller* persons, because it necessitates confronting a part of ourselves we are usually instructed to

repress or not think about. Do you agree with this, or do you have a different sort of philosophy about the function your fiction serves for readers?

TEM: Again, I tend not to think that broadly. What comes to mind, though, when I think about that question, is a recent experience in which something I read touched me. I've just finished reading Robert McCammon's *Gone South* and *Boy's Life*. I thought the first half of *Boy's Life* was alright, but I was not overwhelmingly impressed. Then I read the scene where Cory's dog is dying and the boy prays death away. That experience has now become particularly important to me because yesterday our dog of 14 years died, and our children have been telling us "I didn't want her to die," and asking "Can't we keep her alive?" So we've had to discuss death, why it's important, and why it happens to all of us. That story within the story of *Boy's Life* helped me to get a handle on death again, or have some kind of better understanding about death and about the responsibility of the survivor, even before our dog died. I can't say directly what it has done, and if I could, that wouldn't be the function of literature, it would be the function of therapy. But I hope my work can have that kind of effect on people—not in the sense that you read it and say, "Oh, now I understand 'X' about this." But in the sense that it resonates the same way that story in McCammon's book resonates for me, and keeps coming back to me, and makes me learn something new every time it does. Because I think that's what literature is all about.

♦ ♦ ♦



KATHRYN
PTACEK

ANTHOLOGY ATTIC

Still Dead: Book of the Dead II (John Skipp and Craig Spector, editors; Bantam Books; 320 pages; \$4.99; ISBN 0-553-29839-9).

I read the first volume of zombie stories that Skipp and Spector did, *Book of the Dead*, and I didn't think it was all that hot. So when I came to *Still Dead*, I was pleased — there was a refreshing difference. The stories were just plain better than those in the companion volume.

In the past I've read a *lot* of vampire and werewolf stories, so these tales were a nice change of pace. Of course, when we say zombies here we're talking not the traditional put-a-voodoo-curse-on-you-and-now-you-work-in-the-cane-fields-as-a-zombie, but rather the type of zombies (the living dead, as it were, who eat the flesh of the living, which used to be just the province of ghouls, but everyone wants in on a good thing, I guess) popularized in the horror movies of George Romero.

This doesn't mean you have to see the movies (*Night of the Living Dead*, *Day of the Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead*, and a host of really bad imitators) to enjoy the tales. You really don't. You just have to understand that Something happened to the earth and We All (the living) are now faced with a Zom-

bie Invasion (the long dead, the recently dead; there's dead to the left, dead to the right). And the only surefire way to stop a zombie in his/her/its tracks is to "aim for the brain" and shoot it in that particular spot.

You might expect a certain amount of gore, say, on a scale of one to ten, maybe a fifty-seven or so. I think you would be surprised. I was. There is gore, yes; I mean, we're talking reanimated corpses who stuff the intestines of the living down their gullets — And that's just as an *Hors d'oeuvre*. But there's a lot more here than gore, believe me.

The zombies, as defined by the movies, don't exhibit intelligence or any other personality trait from their previous lives. Thus they are really nothing more than mindless killing and eating machines. Most of the stories in this anthology are not from the point-of-view of the zombies — this would have been real dull real fast — but from those humans facing the zombie menace. There also is a vague religious undertone throughout the zombie milieu — many religions have the tenet of the dead coming to life at the end of the world; it's just that no one ever said what shape those dearly departed would be in when they revived (or is that reanimated; well, that's a

whole 'nother series of films). With this anthology, we know.

"The Old Man and the Dead" by Mort Castle involves a Famous Writer Long Dead (hint: think white beard, hunter, macho type; you get the picture). The story is set up in vignettes, mostly in the past, and written in an almost brusque style, and I really liked it and found that I'd wished it had been a lot longer.

Ms. Geiss, the elementary schoolteacher of Dan Simmons's "This Year's Class Picture" has her rules, her ways of doing things in her classroom, and she's done them just that way for decades now, and just because all her students are zombies now isn't going to disrupt her schedule. What could have been a silly idea quickly became poignant, thanks to Simmons's capable touch.

There's humor (dark, *real* dark) in "Night of the Living Dead Bingo Women" by Simon McCaffery. Here the zombies aren't as threatening as in other tales (because of something that happened to the protagonist); it's a brief fun tale.

In a few short years Elizabeth Massie has established herself as a writer of weird stories, stories that are very much Southern Gothic, and in "Abed," Massie has written another gut-wrencher. It's about

Meggie, a young woman locked in her bedroom by her mother-in-law, and — No, I can't go on; any more detail will spoil it for you. Read it, though, and be warned: this is *strong*, and not for the reasons you think.

Roberta Lannes delivers a story of anger and sadness in "I Walk Alone." Her characters are the half-dead, inhabiting the night club world. They are far more disturbing than the zombies.

In "Passion Play" Nancy Holder takes a look at the famous Oberammergau Passion Play, and what happens to one courageous priest who stands alone after the zombies have come. It is a well thought out and finely executed piece.

Other contributors include: Chan McConnell, Nancy A. Collins, K.W. Jeter, Glen Vasey, John Skipp & Craig Spector, Gahan Wilson, Kathe Koja, Gregory Nicoll, Douglas Morningstar & Maxwell Hart, J.S. Russell, Poppy Z. Brite, Brooks Carruthers, Douglas E. Winter.

Recommended.

Dracula: Prince of Darkness (Martin H. Greenberg, editor; DAW Books; 1992; \$4.99; ISBN 0-88677-531-0).

Vampires. Again. I know, I know. I remember what I said in a previous column: let's put a moratorium on vampire stories. Yeah, I still feel that way... except that this anthology puts a bit of a different spin on that somewhat anemic topic: these stories are about not just any old bloodsucker, but Dracula himself. Therein lies the anthology's weaknesses and strength. The book was calculated to come out just about the time the new Dracula movie was released (I guess the book came out a few months early). I don't know about you, but I think I have sufficient Dracula books now: over the past few months I've received nearly

half a dozen reprints of Bram Stoker's novel, not to mention a novelization of the movie (a novelization of a movie based on a novel... think about that). And I still had my original copy of *Dracula*.

Okay. I do have a minor gripe. There were no author bios or intros. I like seeing those in front of a story, or possibly even at the end of the volume. Please, editors, bring those back. I want to know what else the contributors have done, where they live, what kind of weird hobbies they have, etc. I'm nosy.

F. Paul Wilson leads off with "The Lord's Work" about a world in which vampires have taken over (this could be a somewhat familiar theme to readers of this column, but that's small enough potatoes, believe me), and Sister Carole Flannery isn't about to let them go gently into the night. She is particularly out to get the "cowboys," the human turn-coats who work for the vampires in herding the cattle (read: humans). As with all of Wilson's material, this is well-written and compelling, and I do wish it had been much longer; at the very least, he could do a novel.

"Deep Sleep" by Matthew J. Costello is a great story, about Dracula aboard a ship... a certain famous ship. I liked this, particularly for the historical setting, and because I had the great pleasure of hearing it read by Matt himself at a three-author reading at a New Jersey Barnes & Noble some months before the book was released. I have to confess that for the most part I don't like to hear people read their work, but Matt did a super job; he reads exceptionally well, and it was a lively presentation (Matt used his hands a lot during his presentation, and it was wonderful: he says reading to kids helps).

"The Black Wolf" by Wendi Lee and Terry Brooks was a good story set in a distinctive setting (for vampire stories): the American

West. Wayne Allen Salce contributes a fun short in "Blood From A Turnip." It has Dracula in a world far removed from crypts and gothic Castles.

W.R. Philbrick's "The Cure" was historical too, but this time based in Eastern Europe. The characters were interesting, if not always sympathetic, and it was another one of those stories that I thought could have been made into a novel. Brian Hodge's "Like a Pilgrim to the Shrine" is an interesting look at a modern nihilistic "We're not taking any more crap from the older generation" vampire and Dracula and their fight to see who will rule, as it were, the vampire kingdom. As with all of Hodge's work, it's energetic and well-written.

Other contributors include: Warner Lee, Rex Miller, Bentley Little, John Shirley, Douglas Borton, Richard Laymon, John Lutz, P.N. Elrod, Daniel Ransom.

Recommended.

A Whisper of Blood (Ellen Datlow, editor; Berkley Books; 270 pages; \$4.99; ISBN 0-425-13505-5).

Actually this book was published in '91 by *Morrow*, but I'm reviewing the paperback version.

This anthology is billed, on the cover, as "18 New Tales of Vampirism." Oh, oh. More bloodsuckers. Except that they aren't. In her introduction Ellen Datlow says, "In *Blood Is Not Enough*, I wanted to extend the boundaries of what a vampire is — expand the blood-sucker image into the concept of vampirism. I believe I succeeded. With *A Whisper of Blood*, I had intended to see just *how* far I could take the concept without any actual bloodsucking." She says her editor and fans of vampires were dismayed there were no real vampires planned in the book, so now there are. Most are original stories, although a few were reprints.

"M Is for the Many Things" by Elizabeth Massie is a twisted tale in the Southern horror tradition. I loved it. I think Massie is an excellent writer and one to watch develop over the next few years; she has a unique voice, and a weird way of looking at things. The story? Oh yeah, it's about . . . well, these people who live in a house, and their mother is dying, and . . . and to tell you any more would spoil it. Read it. I don't think you'll forget it soon.

"Folly for Three" is a quirky tale by Barry N. Malzberg, a tale of psychic vampirism. Sometimes in the stories you really have to strain to figure out what kind of vampirism is involved. This was not a tough one. It's kind of kinky.

Melissa Mia Hall wrote "The Pool People," and she's Texan, and you better believe you can tell that from this tale. I do think Southerners write in a very distinct way, far different than a Northeastern

writer, someone from the West Coast, or someone from the midwest. You can tell—a Southerner's horror writing is unique. If you don't think so, just remember Flannery O'Connor. This story is strong, and employs subtle vampirism, and I think it's just about the best I've ever seen from Hall, and she's done some good stuff so far.

"Infidel" is a nasty little story by Thomas Tessier, and involves a woman and the library in the Vatican. Vampirism? you ask. Yes, of a far different sort. K.W. Jeter's "True Love" is a story I won't forget. It shows the lengths to which family will go for one of their own.

Other contributors include Suzy McKee Charnas, Karl Edward Wagner, Robert Silverberg, Kathe Koja, Rick Wilber, Jonathan Carroll, Thomas Ligotti, David J. Schow, Jack Womack, Melinda M. Snodgrass, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, Pat Cadigan, Robert Holdstock and Garry Kilworth.

Recommended — for something different.

I would have liked to review *Back From the Dead*, *Cults of Horror*, and *Devil Worshipers*, all three edited by Martin H. Greenberg and Charles G. Waugh. I wrote to DAW Books, the publisher, several times and finally got an answer from them: no more books available. Which is odd since the books were advertised in the front of *Dracula: Prince of Darkness*, and since I got that book in the summer, that means DAW ran out almost immediately or else just listed them when there was no stock. At any rate, I don't have copies. If anyone out there would like to loan the books to me for review, I'd appreciate it.

That's all for now. The next column will focus on mystery anthologies. Keep reading.

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Welcome to *Rough Cuts* #10. This installment features obscure British films, fanzine reviews, more Hong Kong Horrors and a laserdisc which truly deserves its "special edition" status.

But first, a few words on the '92 presidential election . . .

After twelve divisive, destructive years, the ravenous Republican-weasels have finally been flushed from their dens. And I'm so deliriously happy about this humiliating rout that I'm willing to forego my usual political rant.

In fact, despite what I said about him last time, let's be generous and give Bill Clinton a yearlong grace period to establish his presidency. After that point, it should be obvious as to whether Clinton's indeed a harbinger of hope or just another pol trying to please everybody, and satisfying none.

Clinton has an unenviable task, though. A gutted domestic economy, genocide in Yugoslavia, a shameful educational system, and so on and so forth. It's not going to be an easy four years — in fact, they may be impossible ones. Yet if Clinton can stick to two or three essential issues — I'll settle for the economy and education, thank you very much — we all should be in better shape by the end of 1993.

If not . . . well, if you thought

I was hard on George Bush (whose petulant post-election behavior included gloomy silence, deep depression and a whining dissatisfaction with the "slow transitional process" — not to mention his cynical pardoning of Cap Weinberger), wait'll you see what I have in mind for Bill Clinton!

Then again, Clinton could simply punch the White House time clock and do a better job than the pathetic elitist wanker who held the post before him.

Although, I gotta tell ya, if I hear Fleetwood Mac *one more time*, during any Clinton function, Ross Perot is going to start looking pretty good to me.

Someone should duct-tape a pair of Bose speakers to Slick Willie's skull and crank up some Ministry, maybe "The Land of Rape and Honey," you know?

Or maybe Tipper Gore should be forced to watch the severed head/boner sequence for SPK's "Despair" video instead. On a closed loop.

Yeah.

That oughta do it.



VIDEO REVIEWS

(All films are rated on a One to Four

Star system, Four being best)

Children of the Damned — (1963/England) *** Science Fiction (aliens/superhumans/advanced mental powers) Director: Anton M. Leader Screenplay: Jack Briley With: Ian Hendry, Alan Badel, Barbara Ferris, Alfred Burke B&W, 90 minutes (MGM/UA Home Video — MGM/UA Laserdisc)

This stylish followup to the classic *Village of the Damned* doesn't have the original's sense of mystery, texture or perversity (how many sequels do?), yet it's still a smart, engrossing example of British science fiction. And an important addition to any home video library.

Two UNESCO investigators (Ian Hendry and Alan Badel) track down six ethnically mixed, superhumanly gifted children to a decrepit London church. Before long, each kid's respective government is attempting to exploit the tykes for their own ends. Bad move — as the original *Village of the Damned* ad art warned, "Beware the eyes that paralyze!"

Children of the Damned is routinely dissed as being inferior to its better-known sibling (Maltese *Movie and Video Guide*, for example, calls it "unimaginative"). Yet this is actually a thoughtful and

literate science fiction film with numerous creative touches, such as the moment Badel and Hendry simultaneously "hear" the superkids' telepathetic distress call. Moreover, *Children* dares to criticize; its script attacks ignorance, aggression, nationalism and child abuse.

So why is *Children of the Damned* held in such low regard?

Probably because its precursor, *Village of the Damned*, was a crossover hit.

What?

Stand by—we now explain...

Village's central concept—kids as alien monsters—was praised as fresh and sardonic by many mainstream reviewers, the same ones who usually avoid science fiction movies. By the time the sequel was released, however, this concept no longer had novelty value. And since *Children of the Damned* is more a reworking of than sequel to *Village of the Damned*, these selfsame critics were disappointed; they simply wrote *Children* off as a pallid recycling of the original.

Unfortunately, mainstream critics are ill-equipped to deal with science fiction, typically focusing on such superficialities as "kids as monsters" or special effects rather than the ideation or themes which distinguish this genre. But, like, big surprise, huh?

Whatever. Besides the strengths I've already enumerated, *Children of the Damned* sports an appealing cast composed of familiar and talented genre actors. Hendry, for instance, starred in *Repulsion* and *Captain Kronos - Vampire Hunter*, while Badel was featured in the eerie "In The Picture" episode of the virtually forgotten 1953 British anthology film *Three Cases of Murder* (a title Sinister Cinema should try to acquire). Furthermore, *Children of the Damned* has an unusual, shimmering, hauntingly atonal score courtesy of the more-often-melodic

Ron Grainer, composer of *The Prisoner's* terrific theme song.

So ignore the bad press and check this one out. Blessed with a pristine film-to-tape transfer, also available as half of a budget-priced MGM/UA two-platter laserdisc set (along with *Village of the Damned*), *Children of the Damned* is long overdue for serious reassessment as one of the best early Sixties science fiction films.

Besides, how many other SF movies from this period suggested its male protagonists were involved in a comfortable homosexual relationship? Or watched that relationship dangerously unravel when one of the men unexpectedly found himself attracted to... a woman?

The Last Reunion — (1995/England) *** Horror/Fantasy (ghost story) Director: Leonard Brett Teleplay: Kenneth Hyde With: Eric Portman, Michael Gough, Joan Marion, Basil Appleby, Alfred Burke B&W, 53 minutes (Sinister Cinema)

Here's another British obscurity well worth the trackdown, as the postwar reunion party of a WWII British bomber squadron slowly deteriorates into a nightmarish evening of ghosts and guilt.

Most contemporary viewers are probably going to find *The Last Reunion* either impossibly antiquated or butt-twitchingly tedious. It's talky, static and primitively shot, and hinges on a last-minute twist that today's story-savvy media generation will see coming miles away.

Having said all that, patient fans and/or archivists are urged to seek out *The Last Reunion* anyway — this is an excellent example of that pinnacle of British artistic achievement, the English ghost story.

Broadcast by the BBC in the mid-1950's, probably as part of that network's annual Christmas season ghost story offering, and with an end credit stating it was "Made

In The High Definition System" (!), *The Last Reunion* essentially plays out on one set, an upper-middle class dining room. To be effective, therefore, this economically strait-jacketed production must rely on atmosphere, acting and writing.

Thankfully, all those elements are in place. The cast is anchored by competent performers, with stalwart Eric Portman as the bedeviled squadron commander and, as a dashing pilot, an impossibly young, not-yet-quite-hammy Michael Gough, the beloved character actor who's appeared as everything from a skeptical husband in *Horror of Dracula* to Alfred the butler in *Batman/Batman Returns*. As for ghostly elements, *The Last Reunion's* supernaturalism escalates slowly, subtly. The closing act, in particular, is a powerhouse; the bomber crew's tableside recreation of their final fight builds to a macabre, emotionally devastating climax.

The Last Reunion is one of those rare stories about which the less revealed, the better. Suffice it to say that while it may not be *The Haunting* or even a *Poltergeist*, *The Last Reunion* is a sturdy, worthwhile addition to the ranks of celluloid ghost stories.

One which, like *Children of the Damned*, definitely deserves a space in your home vid library. (Available from Sinister Cinema, P.O. Box 4369, Medford OR 97501-0168, 503-773-6860)



RECOMMENDED REGIONAL VIDEO STORES

So you're stuck in L.A. and need a quick Rudy Ray Moore fix. But where to pick up that copy of *Dolomite* or *The Human Tornado*? Where to find *Of The Dead* or *Sonny Boy* or *Django* or any other of a dozen hard-to-find exploitation titles?

Try Mondo Video A-Go-Go, a

small, relatively new storefront establishment specializing in psychotronic cinema. Located on the border between eastern Hollywood and the same downtown area you watched go up in flames during the '92 Los Angeles riots, a visit to *Mondo* isn't a job—it's an adventure.

Personable Robert Schaffner (whose business card reads "Owner/Evangelist") will be happy to fulfill your (rental only) needs. Don't forget to tell Rob *Rough Cuts* sent you!

Mondo Video A-Go-Go, 1724 N. Vermont Ave., Hollywood CA 90027 213-953-8896.

♦

RECOMMENDED FILM FANZINES

Now for a short continuation of my alphabetized "best of" list: *Little Shoppe of Horrors* (Richard Klemensen, P.O. Box 3107, Des Moines Iowa, 50316).

Despite the glut of horror, science fiction and fantasy tapes, there still exists a critical gap in the current cassette market—namely, the relative lack of Hammer Films on home video.

This is true crime of the most heinous variety. Despite promising recent developments (*Brides of Dracula*, Terence Fisher's atmospheric sequel to his masterly *Horror of Dracula*, just surfaced on MCA Home Video at a bargain-priced \$14.98), certified English classics like *Five Million Years To Earth* or *The Devil's Bride* are still screaming for their tape-to-film transfers.

Happily, *Little Shoppe of Horrors*—the definitive Hammer film fanzine—appears just often enough to occupy the time we might otherwise spend wondering when the hell *X—The Unknown* is coming out on video.

Dick Klemensen has been publishing *Little Shoppe* for over ten years, and each issue has topped the previous one. For ex-

ample, the July 1990 edition counted in at a fat, 170 fact-filled pages. Topics included "the Making of *Kiss of the Vampire*" (with info from various production personnel on that sadly mutilated title), "The Unfilmed Hammer: An A-Z Guide" (projects which never made it), and "The Viewable Hammer," a comprehensive guide to those relatively few Hammer titles which are on cassette.

Shoppe is one of those older 'zines which, early on, staked a claim to a particular generic motherlode; it's been mining that vein ever since. Of course, not all Hammer pictures were great and more than a few were exploitative crap. Yet some were genuinely good films, like *The Quatermass Experiment*, and Hammer's overall track record justifies *Little Shoppe of Horrors'* obsessional interest in this tiny yet influential British production company.

As for *Shoppe* itself, the only criticism I have concerns its tiny print and cluttered layout. And the long delay between issues; it took four years for *Little Shoppe* #10 to follow issue #9!

Then again, I understand the demands of the small press, and those were minor quibbles anyway. Look for copies of this ultimate Hammer 'zine in the dealer's room of your next horror convention. Or write Dick K. himself and see what he's up to. Don't forget to ask which back issues are available.

♦

HONG KONG HORRORS

Let's take a quick peek at two of the more popular Asian Trash Cinema titles. Both, incidentally, can be ordered from *Video Mania*, Suite 129, 2520 N. Lincoln, Chicago IL 60614 312-929-7205.

Burning Sensation—(1989/Chinese) **1/2 Horror (vampires/ghosts) Director: Chia Yung

With: Kathy Wo, Hung Lo, Pearl Cheong. Color, 87 minutes (Rainbow Audio & Video Incorporation)

When an ordinary family is threatened by a deadly female vampire who strangles victims with her tongue (!?), the ghost of a dead TV actress leaps from the family's television set to battle the sucker. If that weren't enough, this psychotronic lunacy occasionally features showstopping musical numbers! Outrageous and entertaining.

Seeding Of A Ghost — (1984/China) *** Horror (witchcraft/ghosts/revenge from the grave/gore film) Director: Yang Chuan *With: Ti Yung, Mui Cheung. Color, 93 minutes (Ocean Shores Video, Ocean Shores Laserdisc)*

Controversial, pioneering Shaw Brothers production, one that drop-kicked Hong Kong cinema away from kung-fu silliness into realms of explicit horror.

After his adulterous wife is brutally murdered, a grieving taxi driver employs a grave-robbing sorcerer to wreak lethal vengeance on those responsible for her death. What follows is a gutcrunching splatterfest of brain eating, backed-up toilets, weightless corpse-fucking and male anal rape (with a giant wooden match!).

Originally planned as the third installment of the *Black Magic* series, *Seeding Of A Ghost* ran afoul of censorship problems during its initial release. No wonder; the first half of this film may be a seamy, realistic story of a marriage gone bad, but the second half shamelessly wallows in some of the most repulsive scenes ever committed to Asian cinema.

Wait'll you see the face-sucking mutant baby!

Highly recommended; required viewing, in fact.

Alien - (1979/England)
 ***1/2 SF/Horror (alien invader/dark house) Director: Ridley Scott Screenplay: Dan O'Bannon With: Sigourney Weaver, Tom Skerrit, Veronica Cartwright, Ian Holm, John Hurt, Harry Dean Stanton, Yaphet Kotto Color, Letterboxed. 117 minutes (Fox/Video-Image Entertainment)

Back when 1991's *Aliens* Special Edition laserdisc was released, there was considerable grousing about the graininess of sequences director Jim Cameron had originally cut from the theatrical print and then reinserted for his comprehensive letterboxed edition. This was one of the few negatives connected to Cameron's megasuccessful sequel; the common consensus still seems to be that *Aliens* is the rare case where the followup was superior to the original.

That was wrongheaded thinking then, and, with the release of this superb six-disc letterboxed CAV edition of Ridley Scott's masterpiece, the superiority of the original *Alien* over its noisy successor is even more pronounced.

I haven't the space nor inclination to debate the relative merits of Scott vs. Cameron here (the thuddingly dull yet still intriguing *Alien 3*, of course, doesn't enter into the conversation). Let's just say that R. Scott/Dan O'Bannon/H.R. Giger's queasy sexual subtext beats the hell out of Cameron's superficial motherhood allegory, and leave it at that. Although, I could also note that America's frenzied embrace of *Aliens*' big-budget action trappings underlines this country's preference for car crashes over content. But why kick that dead old cow?

Anyway, this deluxe edition of *Alien* more than justifies its hundred buck price tag. The four sides which comprise the film itself have been beautifully remastered and letterboxed (about time, god-

damit!), and home vid viewers can finally appreciate director Scott/director of photography Derek Vanlint's meticulous and obessional full-frame compositions. This collector's edition also includes a colorful printed insert graced with above-par liner notes by Michael Mattesino, as well as a full two-sided disc of absolutely incredible supplementary material compiled by the same duo responsible for the equally impressive *Aliens* Special Edition supplementary disc (David C. Fein and Michael Mattesino, again).

This last *Alien* disc is, quite simply, the best supplementary section yet released on any Special Edition Laserdisc. Packed with rare production stills, script extracts and behind the scene home movies shot by *Alien*'s technical crew, enhanced by numerous samples of preproduction art by *Alien* designers Ron Cobb, H.R. Giger, Chris Foss and Jean "Moebius" Gerard, the supplementary disc has such a staggering array of riches that *Video Watchdog* editor Tim Lucas has estimated it would take approximately *six hours* to digest in a single sitting. Yes, the famous deleted "cocoon" sequence is here (along with *eight other* cut scenes!), and while you're pondering the wisdom of Scott dropping the cocoon sequence in the first place, at least you'll now understand exactly where James Cameron got the inspiration for the look of his own movie.

The other deleted sequences include moments even hardcore *Alien* fanatics haven't known about. The crew listening to the bizarre alien warning beacon, Weaver and Cartwright having a furious argument, a bloodier death for Harry Dean Stanton, and more. All perfectly mixed and letterboxed.

So now let's see which direction this argument about the original vs. the sequel takes. Whatever your own fix on *Alien*, you'll un-

doubtedly find yourself repeatedly drawn back to this disc, whether replaying the ominous credit sequence, savoring the inventive (and underappreciated) sound effects, or just grooving with the film's tight, fluid, mesmerizing first 45 minutes.

Which leads to one strong objection — the *Alien* transfer is too damn bright, a problem plaguing all previous video/disc releases of this title. I've long railed against the manner in which video transfers pump up the image at the expense of the original lighting, and *Alien* is the perfect argument against this kind of visual tampering. The pulsing machinery you see on the *Nostromo* during the film's opening tracking shot was never meant to be glimpsed that clearly, folks, and, indeed, the theatrical prints of this scene were *much* darker. And more evocative.

But that's my only complaint. Here's one Special Collector's Edition which not only lives up to its hype, but surpasses it.

It's a wrap.

Next time — and I've been promising this for so many issues now that if I were a software developer, I'd be accused of promoting vaporware—we will finally, actually get around to unveiling *The Essential Genre Filmbook Library*.

Honest to gawd.

Plus we'll take a long look at an atrocity picture most everyone's already reviewed, but only as an atrocity picture: *Man Behind the Sun 731*.

Til then, don't forget to check out the recently released Golden Oldie videos *Mad Love* and *The Mask of Fu Manchu*.

You'll soon discover that sexual obsession, pure kink and Asian-bashing ain't nothin' new, kids.

Until next time.

Stay bad.

THE MASK OF TRUTH HAS MANY HOLES

LIONEL FENN

LIONEL FENN — as most CD readers already know — is a pseudonym for Charles L. Grant. Fenn is the author of a series of popular action/adventure/humor novels, featuring the ultra-hero, Kent Montana (Montana even has his own fan club/newsletter — *HAGGIS*). We've never published anything like the following novelette, so be prepared. What follows is Lionel Fenn's idea of a *noir*-type adventure, written with his usual style and wit. Humor in *Cemetery Dance*? Only when it's this good!

The city went dark once the sun set, unrelentingly dark except for the lights from the stores, the theaters, the flashy lounges, the empty office buildings, the seedy bars and seedy clubs, and the glaring headlights of the few lonely automobiles that endlessly prowled the rain-washed blacktop in search of something the solitary driver would never find, but nevertheless always tried to find because, in finally finding it, he would be more than he was now, which was forever lost in the city that had no lights.

And on a wide empty thoroughfare, glistening after a sudden torrent had washed the scum and the filth and the dirt and the candy wrappers and the refuse and the layers of hard despair from its pitted surface into the gutters and shadowed doorways where it all belonged, there was a streetlamp.

A man leaned against the streetlamp.

He wore a tailored trench coat with the collar flipped up, and a low-crowned hat whose brim had been pulled low over his eyes. He seemed a tall man, a lean and muscular man, a man waiting there on the desolate fringe of the city's eternal dark for destiny to bring him closer to that which he had sought for most his adult life.

A man alone.

He lit a cigarette, cupping his hand around the match to keep the slight wind from extinguishing not

only his hopes and his dreams, but also the fire.

He needed the fire.

He couldn't smoke without it.

And once the cigarette was lit and the match tossed into the gutter with the rest of the city's misery, he blew smoke into the air and watched the slight wind take that smoke and twist it and shred it and cast it aside like so many souls cast aside by the gods that had turned their backs on this metropolis by the river, in the dark.

He waited, but he didn't have to wait long.

A car approached from far uptown, where life still pulsed and living was still worth it. It slowed. Its hood steamed from the recent cleansing rain, and its interior was dark.

The man watched it without moving.

Smoke curled from beneath his hat.

The car, having paused, moved on, quickly gaining speed and soon vanishing into the dark that buried the terminus of the five-lane street that called itself an avenue.

The man relaxed.

He smoked.

A large bus hissed and steamed to a halt at the corner across the way, its interior lights bright and turning the passengers therein to mere ghosts of their former selves as they rode the avenue in search of their rightful stop, there to disembark and continue the bleak, and dark, years of their bleak, and dark, existences.

No one got off.

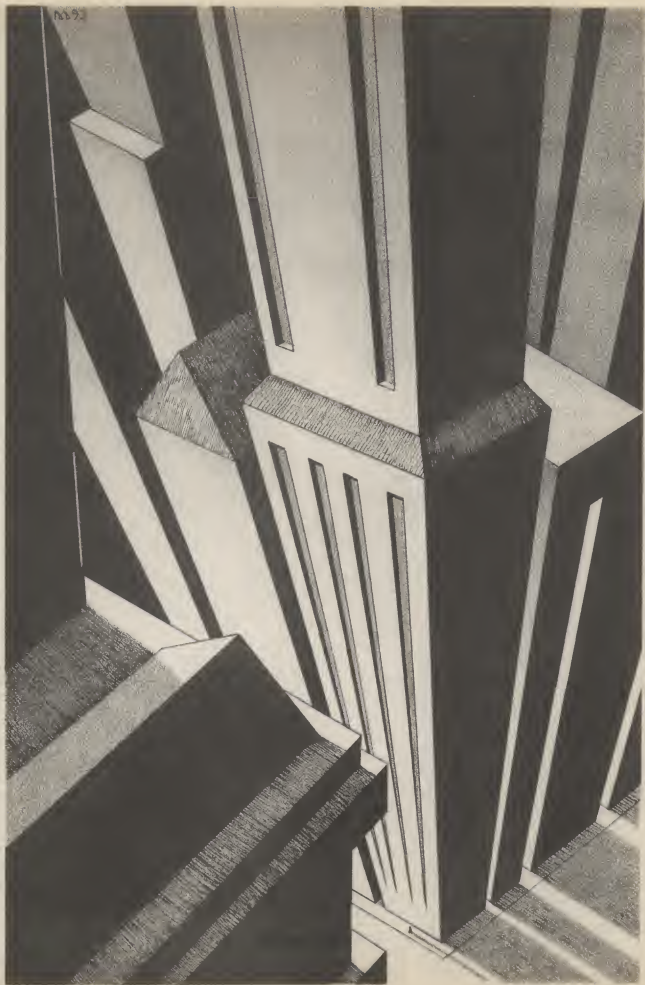
The man smoked.

The bus left.

He was alone.

Until he realized that he wasn't alone.

Across the street, at the foot of the wide steps that led between two monolithic stone lions to a silent library wherein the knowledge of the world was held



in trust for those who were lost in the intellectual vacuum of the city's rapid decline, was a woman.

She wore a snugly belted trench coat, and a hat whose brim was pulled down over her eyes.

The man watched her.

She crossed the street.

The heels of her high-heeled shoes echoed like gunshots off the worn stone walls of the buildings that loomed into the night sky buried in black clouds from which, at any moment, rain might fall again.

She stopped at the fringe of the streetlamp's light, a pale light that barely touched the dark that surrounded her, and him, and the city where the lights were feeble and bright and defiant and so touched with melancholy that one could not help but weep if one still had a heart the city had not drained of all emotion and feelings.

A hand came out of her trench coat pocket. It was a long-fingered hand, tipped with red.

"Got a light?" she asked in a low husky voice.

"I might," the man answered. "Who's asking?"

"Just me."

He nodded, pulled an engraved gold lighter from his trench coat pocket and flipped it open and had it burning in one smooth motion. She came into the light, cupped a hand around his hand, and gently, so gently, drew the flame to the tip of her long cigarette. She inhaled as he flipped the lighter shut and returned it to his trench coat pocket; she blew smoke the slight wind shredded before it reached the dark night sky; she stepped up onto the curb and faced him.

And what a face it was that faced him, he thought as he shifted without stopping his leaning—a pale face, a face without harsh edges, a face without eyes because they were hidden by the brim of the hat she had pulled down, although not far enough that he didn't see the luxurious waves of ebony hair that cascaded to her shoulders which were, in spite of the trench coat, gently rounded and, he was sure, soft.

"I'm Isabelle," she said in that maddeningly low husky voice.

"Nice name," he answered.

"Old-fashioned."

"I like old-fashioned."

"So do I."

He nodded and looked around. "I like New York in June." He smoked. "How about you?"

"It sucks."

He nodded. "Yeah. Know what you mean."

She smoked. "Can we get on with it?"

He lifted an eyebrow in a shrug she couldn't see because he had the brim of his hat pulled down so low.

She took a deep breath. "My husband was murdered."

"Yes."

"I want you to find his killer."

He nodded. He smoked.

"If you don't find his killer, I may be next."

He smoked. He nodded.

She smoked. She waited.

"I'll need the facts," he said at last.

She reached into her trench coat and pulled out a folded sheet of paper. "It came this morning," she said as she handed it to him.

He unfolded it, he read it, he refolded it, he put it in his trench coat just as she reached into her trench coat and pulled out a thick envelope which she handed to him, and which he opened, nodded at the money he saw inside, and put into his trench coat.

"You didn't count it."

"I trust you."

She took careful hold of his arm. "I don't want to die."

"You won't."

Her lips so lush and deeply red quivered into a cynical smile. "You're so sure."

He patted the hand, tossed the cigarette into the gutter with the rest of life's rain-soaked debris so casually and callously tossed aside by humanity in its disregard for the survival of the fragile fabric of the universe, and walked away.

"Wait!" she called softly as he faded into the shadows.

He stopped.

"They didn't tell me your name, the people who recommended you."

He looked over his shoulder. "Do you really need to know?"

"Yes."

"Just call me Montana," he said as he vanished into the dark. "Kent Montana."



It was a joint like any other joint in an uncaring city, a joint that pours spirits and fermented liquids down the desperately thirsty throats of those who have lost touch with their essential humanity: it had a long bar on the right hand wall, several tables down the middle, and many leather-backed booths along the lefthand wall. The walls were paneled, there were oils in ornate frames on the walls, and in the back was a grand piano seen to by a thin gentleman in a tuxedo, whose fingers raced across the stained ivory keys like a man fleeing the past and uncertain about the future, while the present could damn well take care of itself.

Kent sat in the booth by the front window and looked down at the paper the woman had given him.

Name of Victim: Artemus Coy.

Occupation of Victim: Proprietor of Coy's College of Beautiful Knowledge.

Method of Demise: Suffocation.

Date of Demise: three days ago.

Place of Demise: Coy's College of Beautiful Knowledge.

Progress of Investigation Team of City Police: Zilch.

Suspects: None. Everyone loved him. He loved everybody. Who'd want to kill a sweet guy like that?

Clues: His private collection of pre-owned facial masks mysteriously missing from the safe in his office, a safe to which only he had the combination.

Interesting, thought Kent as he sipped from a glass of his private stock of Glenbannock the waitress had placed in front of him before he even had a chance to order; now who would murder a man who does facials and perms for a living?

He tapped a finger absently on the paper.

But who indeed would murder anyone, for any reason? Is it a sign that we're not far from the savages whence we sprang not all that many millennia ago? Could it be that our coating of civilization is only a light jacket to be tossed aside at the first sign of a hot summer and hotter passions? Are we so crushed by the every day burden of living that we can no longer handle the niceties of discourse and disagreement without putting a bullet through our adversaries?

He took another sip and decided that if he was going to think like that for the rest of the case, he might

as well put a bullet through his own skull and be done with it.

Jesus, murder was depressing.

A woman slid smoothly into the booth, picked up his glass, sipped at it, put the glass down, turned the paper around and read it.

She was a lovely woman in a dark sort of city-crushed way. Her vivid red hair was cut alarmingly short and brushed back over her pixie ears, her eyes were an astonishing pair of rare emeralds, and her lips were rubies smoothed into obscene perfection.

"Tough case, Boss," she said, leaned back, unbuttoned her trench coat, and plucked at the mohair sweater clinging provocatively and unnecessarily to her upper torso. "You know who did it?"

He shook his head. "No, Maxie, I don't."

"The wife."

He lit a cigarette.

"Sure. She was jealous of her old man hanging around other women all day, hearing their secrets, soothing their egos, that sort of crap. More than one probably tried to put a move on him." She took another sip of his drink. "Maybe he didn't get out of the way."

"Interesting," he said.

She snapped her lacquered fingers and the waitress brought over the bottle, and another glass.



The piano player played "Melancholy Baby."

Maxie poured for both of them, picked up her glass, and slowly turned it around before her gaze. "My hunch is, you talk to some of the regulars, you'll find the one who sent Isabelle over the edge."

He smoked.

She drank.

He drank.

The piano player played.

"Maybe you're right," he conceded at last. "But why would she pay me to find the killer?"

"To throw you off the track."

His eyes narrowed, but she couldn't see it so he took off his hat and narrowed them again. He wanted to be sure she could see he was thinking.

"It says here," he said as he turned the paper back around so he could read it, "that everybody loved him."

Maxie sighed wearily. "You always hurt the one you love."

"Is that why you . . . punched me yesterday?"

Maxie gasped. "Why, no . . . I mean . . . you were trying to cop a feel!"

"I was brushing a spider off your sweater."

"You didn't say may I."

"It was poisonous."

She frowned. "Then I guess you saved my life."

He shrugged. Saving lives in a city like this was bound to produce repercussions unthought of by the one doing the saving; but then, repercussions reverberated throughout one's life when one lived in a city where everyone's motives were suspect and everyone's lives were—

He shook his head vigorously.

Maxie turned the paper around. "Smothered, huh?"

He nodded. He smoked.

She drank. "How?"

"Doesn't say."

"Mask," she said after a moment's consideration.

"Pardon?"

She tapped the paper. "The killer tied the poor schmuck to one of the chairs and applied a double-thick coating of facial mask. Green, as in greed. Or jealousy. Only this time, there weren't holes to breathe." She shuddered, and so did the sweater. "God."

Kent turned the paper around and stared. "Where the hell'd you get that?"

"Read between the lines, Boss."

He did. "Son of a bitch."

He drank.

She drank.

The piano player played.

At that moment a pudgy little man whose face was the consistency of dough and the color of flour pushed into the booth beside Maxie. He wore a faded plaid

hunting jacket, an orange hat with the flaps flapping about his ears, and fingerless gloves. He sneezed, blew his nose on a handkerchief he pulled from his hip pocket, and glanced furtively around the room.

"Boss," he greeted in a sniveling high-pitched voice.

"Worm," said Kent.

"Jesus," said Maxie, wrinkling her powdered nose. "You stink."

"I been busy," Worm explained without looking at her. "The boss give me a job, I got to do the job or the Boss don't pay me, ain't that right, Boss?"

"Something like that."

"Well," Worm said, ducking his head in case someone took a shot at it, "I know who killed Liza Bennington."

Kent stared.

Maxie stared.

Worm blinked. "What? What?"

"Worm, you idiot," Maxie said, "the Bennington babe was arrested in Utah, extradited to California, and bit the legalized big one *two years ago*."

Worm blinked like a mole. "Oh."

"Christ, no wonder you stink."

"It was a tough case."

Maxie took a drink.

Ken wanted to take another drink, but he didn't dare. If he took a drink now, he wouldn't stop; and if he didn't stop, he'd get drunk, which, when he thought about it and got a whiff of Worm Josetti's two year drought, probably wasn't such a bad idea.

But there was Isabelle to think about.

Which he did. And decided that if he kept that up, he'd need a shower worse than Worm needed a shower.

Life was like that in the big dark city—cold showers, cold hearts, and a snitch who couldn't sneak up on a corpse.

Then Worm saw the paper and turned it around, read it, and nodded knowingly. "Ah. Antoine Barcelona did it, right?"

Maxie scowled.

Kent turned the paper around, read it, and said, "Antoine? Who the hell is Antoine?"

"Artemus Coy's main assistant, Boss. Took the really tough jobs, y'know? Bald women, stuff like that. He was jealous because Artemus got all the ones with hair. Thought he was an *artiste* and the old man was just a fake who talked a good curl." He tapped the paper with a fingernail so encrusted with filth, one couldn't tell it from the rest of the finger. "Probably figured he could sweet talk Isabelle into selling him the business so he could double the prices and make out like a bandit. No one would ever know."

Kent brushed some dirt from the paper and squinted at it. "Where the hell do you see that? Be-

tween the lines?"

"Shit, no. It's down there on the bottom, in the fine print."

Kent looked.

Maxie drank.

Worm sneezed.

"Damn," said Kent.

Then he dropped several large bills on the table, one of whom fell onto the floor and was immediately thrown out by the burly bartender with the world-weary eyes, picked up his hat, draped his trench coat over his left arm, and slid out of the booth.

"Where you going, Boss?" Worm asked.

"Home."

"Why?"

"I have an appointment with Orpheus."

"Another client?"

Maxie slapped him.

Worm sneezed on her.

Maxie yelped and slapped him again.

Kent opened the door just as the rain exploded from the dark night sky, and he looked back at the two lost souls battling in the booth.

Jesus, he thought, I just gotta get another job.



It isn't easy, sleeping in the city, thought Kent Montana as he stood in his bathroom and stared blearily at what stared back at him from the faintly cracked and skewed mirror hanging over the stained and cracked sink that dripped water with more rust in it than an old stripper's hips; the sirens wake you, the screams wake you, the nightmares wake you, the memories haunt you, and before you know it, it's another day, another dollar, and it's a damn good thing I'm rich because I couldn't stand to do this for a living.

But today was another day, there was another case to be solved, and if he wanted to earn the money Isobelle Coy had given him so trustfully, he'd better get on with it.

He did.

He put on his trench coat and his hat, slipped his gun into his trench coat, and walked out the door.

It was a cloudy day in the city that day, suffusing the air with a resigned and heady gloom; yet the streets as always were filled with pedestrians, some bustling to work, some hustling the bustlers, some standing around wondering what had happened to their insignificant lives that they had become so insignificant that they couldn't remember what they were supposed to do from day to day except breath in, breath out, and somehow, in some way, feed the engines that were their hearts.

Kent stopped.

Jesus.

He shook his head, pulled the hat down over his eyes, and made his way quickly to the dowager chic part of the city where, within minutes, he found Coy's College of Beautiful Knowledge squeezed elegantly between a candle boutique and a nostalgia head shop. He stood thoughtfully at the curb, out of the direct flow of humanity, and noticed that the College was artfully framed in aluminum, the huge display window artfully covered with posters and sale ads, and the recessed doorway actually paved in yellow brick.

There was a black wreath on the door.

He leaned against a streetlamp several doors down and watched as customers disappeared into the College and, not long afterward, reappeared in such an array of coif and makeup that there were moments when he didn't recognize those going out as those who had gone in.

He thought about that.

He thought about the fact that the College hadn't closed, even though its headmaster hadn't even been buried.

He thought about dropping in on Sgt. Jake Monahony, to see what the police had come up with, even though they had ruled the death an inventive form of suicide, precipitated by the fact that Artemus Coy had learned that the city wanted to tear down the entire block and erect a baseball stadium; he was too old, the police claimed, to start over again. He was ruined. A man who had devoted his life and his talents, his heart and his soul, to making plain women beautiful and ugly women not so ugly, replaced by men in snug uniforms who stood around and scratched themselves in front of fifty thousand people.

He thought about Isobelle, her lips, her eyes, and decided it was too damn early to think about Isobelle.

The sun began to set.

The shadows began to crawl.

He waited until he had finished his cigarette, then tossed the butt into the gutter, and pushed away from the streetlamp.

Then he gasped, nearly screamed, and grabbed the streetlamp again.

Damn! he thought, reaching down to rub the cramps in his thighs; how the hell do they do that without falling over?

When his senses returned, he moved gingerly to the doorway, ignoring the curious stares of those who had stood by and watched his agony. After straightening his hat, flattening his collar, and adjusting the trench coat belt to better accentuate the broad of his chest and the trim of his waist, he went inside.



It was an ordinary salon of hopeless dreams and false hopes. Chairs for the waiting, chairs for the

doing, steel cones and steel rollers and mirrors everywhere but on the ceiling. There were no customers now; there was only a tall, thin, handsome man in a matador outfit sitting on a bench, flipping through what looked to Kent like a leather-bound appointment book.

The man looked up.

Kent took off his hat.

The man stood.

Kent nodded.

The man dropped the book on the bench and said, "I know you."

Kent managed, barely, not to wince. Any second now, this lean-faced, slick-haired creator of false images would peg him as the former English butler on *Passions and Power*, a continuing daytime drama from which he had luckily, as it turned out, been fired. No one ever recognized him from the features he had made; no one ever knew him as a Scots baron from an unnamed Hebrides isle.

No, that would be too easy, and life, in the city whether it was dark or not, was never that easy.

Thus forever in the minds of those who knew, he was nothing more than a goddamn butler.

"Antoine, I take it," Kent said, grabbing the initiative.

"Kent Montana," Antoine replied, snatching the initiative back and flaunting it like a cape.

"So, Antoine . . . where were you two nights ago, at ten o'clock?" Kent asked casually, picking up a fashion magazine and flipping through it as he shredded the man's initiative with some shrapnel of his own.

"Home."

"All alone?"

The man nodded sorrowfully. "By the telephone."

Kent doubted. "All . . . alone?"

Antoine slumped back to the bench. "And feeling blue, damnit, yes."

Kent picked up another magazine. "Why'd you kill Artemus?"

The master stylist paled and swallowed. "I . . . I don't know what you're talking about."

Of course you don't, Kent thought; nobody ever knows what I'm talking about. It must be the accent.

"You have an accent," said the matador.

"You hated him," Kent said, deflecting the diversion. "You were jealous. You smothered him."

Antoine laughed silently, then loudly, then silently again. "You're a fool, Montana."

Kent raised an eyebrow. "How'd you know my name?"

"Isabelle told me."

"Then you know."

"Yes."

"Well, if you didn't kill him, who did?"

"Why, Eva, of course."

Kent nodded.

The matador smirked. "Mr. Coy's favorite customer. Until, that is, he threw her out for trying to feel me up." He smoothed a hand down his matador trousers. "The ladies find this tempting. So I'm told."

Kent thought it was bloody stupid, but made no comment. Instead, he asked for Eva's address.

"You're going to talk to her?"

"Perhaps."

"She's a bear, you know."

Kent considered the implications.

The sun went down.

The city, when the sun set, got dark, except for all the lights.

"I have to close up," Antoine said.

"Yes. I suppose you must."

The matador stripped off his gaudy bolero jacket, unfastened the girdle thus revealed beneath, and sighed explosively when half his body weight bulged over the top of his trousers. "Jesus," he said wearily, "in my next incarnation, I'm going to be a goddamn monk."

Kent understood vanity, and appearances, and the dreams one in a business such as this must foster whether he believed them himself or not. He smiled, set his hat atop his head, pulled down the brim, and opened the door.

Just before he stepped out, he turned. "Who gets this place now?"

"Sorry?"

"Now that Mr. Coy's . . . gone. Who gets the College?"

Antoine seemed nonplussed. "Why . . . I don't know."

Kent nodded.

The matador with the gut nodded back.

Kent stepped outside, in the dark city, and wondered what the hell he was going to do next.

He didn't have to wait long.

A gleaming black car braked hard at the curb, a large man leapt out, grabbed Kent's arms, and threw him into the back. Before he could sit up, someone else thumped him with either a hell of a big fist, or a baseball bat, or a blackjack. Either way, darkness darker than the dark of the dark city descended upon him, and he sank into a dreamless, but painful, sleep from which he ascended into a room as white as the hem of an angel's white gown.

"Damn," he said from the floor upon which he lay.

"Take off your clothes," purred the woman on the couch.



She was short, she was round, she wore a pure white shoulderless gown his expert eye informed him was silk, with just that delicate touch of hand-sewn taffeta at the bodice. Her ebony hair was permed, her eyelashes were ridiculous, and the gun in her hand was a sawed-off .38 special.

He sat up.

She smiled.

He said, "Mrs. Eva Olman, I presume?"

"Very clever, Mr. Montana," she said flatly. "Or should I call you Baron?"

He shrugged.

She used the gun in an expressive way, leading him from the floor to a high-back, embroidered white wing chair facing her across a white glass cocktail table upon which had been placed a bone china tea set. He took off his hat. He unbuttoned his trench coat. He crossed his legs. Such, he thought, were the tiny rituals that make up a man's life just before he's about to be blown to hell and gone.

The room was large, with a doorway behind the couch that appeared to lead into a hall, and an archway to his left that appeared to lead into a ballroom, and a triple French door on his right that appeared to lead to a patio with a low wall around it, the better, he supposed, to keep people from falling the at least thirty stories to the street below.

She settled the gun in her lap.

He took a breath, proud of himself for not screaming when the back, and at least one side, of his head threatened to start for home without him.

"What do you want?"

"The man who killed Arty."

"And you didn't?"

"Don't be silly, you silly man. Why would I kill Arty?"

"Because he made you look like Shirley Temple when you wanted to look like a goddess."

She winced.

He smiled sympathetically.

She raised the gun. "If I had killed him, you silly goose, I would have used this."

He shook his head. "No, I don't think so. You're much too clever for that, my dear. You can't have suspicion surround you; your position in society strictly forbids it. So you used the mask to throw suspicion on Antoine. But I'm afraid you made one fairly awful mistake."

She waited.

He waited.

She lowered the gun.

Nuts, he thought; she isn't going to confess.

"What's the mistake?" she asked with a slight giggle.

"This," he said, pulled out his own gun, shot her gun from her hand, leapt from the chair and shot the

gun from the hand of the big man who had raced into the room at the sound of the shot, whirled and shot the shotgun from the hand of the chauffeur who had raced in from the balcony at the sound of one of the shots, then whirled and aimed his gun at Eva Olman's forehead.

"You hurt me," she complained, cradling her gunhand against her bosom.

"You'll live," he snapped.

He slapped on his hat, made sure the others weren't about to jump him or shoot him or throw something nasty at him while he wasn't looking, then marched to the hall, turned, and said, "There's an old Highland saying you might remember the next time you fall in love with a married man, Eva."

She gasped.

He smiled, tipped his hat, and left.

When he emerged into the darkness that had engulfed the city, he decided to walk home.

Walking was good for thinking, and thinking was about all he had left now, since he had met the prime suspects and hadn't a clue who had done it.

A car followed him.

He looked.

The car stopped. Sgt. Monahony got out, a man built like a fireplug with a face like a bulldog from which protruded both a nose like a banana and an unlit cigar.

"Baron."

"Sergeant."

They walked.

"I hear you don't think it was suicide."

"No."

"You figure it was the wife?"

"No."

"Mrs. Olman, the jealous woman who looks like Shirley Temple?"

"No."

"Antoine, the matador?"

"No."

The detective lit the cigar.

Kent lit a cigarette.

The city roared and whispered and muttered its filthy, disgusting, obscene, treacherous secrets around them. The detective spat into the gutter, and grunted. "You figure on letting me in on the secret before you get hurt, messing around in police business, making my job harder than it already is in this stinking excuse for a city?"

"Too late."

The detective shook his massive head, took off his crummy hat, scratched through what was left of his hair, and slapped the hat against his side. "Y'know, I could run you in for obstruction of justice."

Kent grinned. "You wouldn't do that, Sergeant. You like me too much."



MD93

"How the hell can I like you? I don't even know you."

They shook hands, traded lies the way strangers always traded lies with strangers they wanted to like them even if they were never going to meet again, then walked into the bar like every other bar in the city and sat in the first booth.

The waitress brought them two glasses and a bottle of Glenbannock.

"Jesus," the detective said as he watched Kent pour. "You can afford that shit?"

"I'm rich."

"You pay your rent, too?"

Kent nodded.

"And you even pay your secretary who, in case you thought I didn't notice but I did because I'm a damn good cop, is sitting in the booth right behind us with someone that looks like a cake that got stepped on?"

Kent nodded.

"Christ, Montana, what the hell kind of gumshoe are you anyway?"

Kent smoked. Drank. Cleared his throat. "Rich," he said.

The detective smoked. Drank. Cleared his throat. "So who did it?"

There was a sneeze, a slap, a curse, a sour note on the piano, a dropped glass behind the bar, a wailing siren outside, a melancholy country tune on the jukebox, a weeping woman on the piano, a snoring drunk in the corner, and a crackling roll of thunder that presaged a storm that would soon make a futile attempt to wash the city clean again.

"You know, Jake," Kent said, holding his glass between his palms and studying the liquid therein with a melancholy eye, "It's a filthy dirty job, this snooping about into other people's lives, and I—"

The door opened as the storm began, and in a harsh rush of wind and rain, Isobelle Coy entered, closely followed by Antoine Barcelona, who had changed from his matador's costume into jeans, a white shirt open to the navel, several dozen gold chains from which dangled several dozen crucifixes of a jewelry nature, and black satin pumps. Without acknowledging Kent's presence, they seated themselves at the table next to his booth, removed their coats, except for Antoine who wasn't wearing one, and ordered drinks from the waitress.

Someone sneezed.

Someone got slapped.

Isobelle, her hair so soft and delicate and drenched under the pert black beret she wore, took a sip of her drink. "Kent," she said without looking over, "I think we have to talk."

"Say nothing," Antoine cautioned her harshly. "He's not on your side. He's not on anybody's side."

Except his own."

"Shaddup," Sgt. Monahony ordered.

Antoine blanched.

Kent drank.

The piano player, who had managed to extricate his piano from the weeping woman, played.

The door opened and Eva Olman made an entrance, in a ten-foot feathery boa—white; a floor-length silk-and-satin gown without much to it above the waist—white; and a mid-length cape of pure Highland cashmere—white, with a touch of gold trim. Without waiting for an invitation, she sat at the table with Isabelle and Antoine, took a cigarette from her purse and lit it with a white lighter. Then she stared directly at Kent.

"My boys are outside," she said meaningfully. "You hurt them."

"Shaddup," Sgt. Monahony snarled.

Eva blew smoke in his general direction.

Jake's eyes widened.

Someone sneezed.

Someone got slapped.

The piano player played "Melancholy Baby."

The weeping woman got up off the floor and lay back across the piano.

Kent drank.

The sergeant crushed his cigar in the ashtray, pulled a stick of chewing gum from his jacket pocket, and folded it neatly into his mouth. "Well?" he said.

Kent took a deep breath. He hated this part. This was the part where someone was accused of murder, someone confessed, someone shot someone else when someone else they didn't even know about turned off the lights, and when the lights were turned back on, half the place would be dead, and he'd be out of a job. Again.

Moving as carefully as he could, since he didn't want to get shot, he pushed back into the corner of the booth, lit a cigarette, and said, "Isabelle wanted her husband dead because he was messing around with Eva. Eva wanted him dead because he was messing around with his wife. Antoine wanted him dead because he never got all the real society types, just those with aspirations. Maxie wanted him dead because she wanted to live her life as a blonde and got Orphan Annie instead. Worm wanted him dead because Worm wanted to change his image and Artemus insisted that he only did women, as Eva and Isabelle know. And you, Jake, wanted him dead because he tried to foist you off on Antoine because you don't have enough hair."

He waited patiently for the reactions, the denials, the cries of shock, the shouts of "how dare you", the insistence on innocence.

He got them.

He waited until they were finished.

He looked at Antoine.

"What are you looking at me for?" said the matorador.

Kent stubbed out his cigarette, and put another in his mouth, but he didn't light it; he drank instead. Then he drank again before the sergeant finished the bottle. "Well," he said, "Eva didn't do it because the mask would have clashed with all that white, and besides she has goons."

"I have pills," Eva snapped, albeit in relief.

"Maxie didn't do it because I once told her she looked smoldering in that red hair."

Worm snickered.

Maxie slapped him.

"Isabelle didn't do it because she's the obvious suspect and the obvious suspect never does it unless there's a twist at the end, which there isn't, so she didn't."

Isabelle blew him a sensuous, sexy, flammable kiss.

Kent looked at his cigarette; it was lit; he smoked.

"Jake didn't do it because he's a man of the city, a man resigned to eighteen strands of hair in a city that doesn't count hairs but only the lives of the . . . Jesus. He didn't do it, trust me."

Antoine huffed. "But what about that Worm person?"

"He's been away for two years."

There was a silence.

A long silence, except for the thunder, the lightning, and the piano player.

Suddenly Antoine jumped his feet. "All right!" he screamed. "All right, you dirty rotten baron you, you got me! I did it! He promised me the shop when he died, and then he didn't die! So you know what I did?"

"You murdered him," Isabelle said angrily.

"You knew it too?"

She frowned.

Antoine laughed. "Yes! Yes! And you know what? It was fun! Fun, I tell you, fun, fun, fun, fun!"

Kent sighed. "Take him away, Jake, before I murder him."

Sgt. Monahony slipped gracefully out of the booth and slapped the cuffs on Antoine, read him his rights, and dragged him out to the street.

No one moved.

No one spoke.

Then Kent stood, put on his hat, and walked to the door.

"Kent!" Isabelle cried.

"Boss!" Worm called.

"Kent!" Maxie yelled.

Kent waited.

"Montana," Eva said.

He nodded.

He opened the door.

It was raining out there, in the city, in the dark, and he flipped up his collar, pulled down his hat, and walked into the storm. He had done his job, but it didn't taste good. Antoine was a man beset by ambition, lust, greed, and all the other natural ills a man in a matador suit is prey to. And who was he, Kent Montana, except for being the hero, to pass judgment on such a man? Who was he to watch a man crumble before his very eyes, as much a victim as the other victim except that the other victim was dead?

Who, indeed, was Kent Montana?

"Hey, Kent."

The rain sluiced down his trench coat and into his shoes.

A woman matched him stride for stride. "That was very nice."

"Yeah."

"You should be proud."

"Yeah."

"It's a bitch, I know that."

"Yeah."

"You wanna flatten my mohair?"

He grinned and took Maxie's arm, and together they walked away from the bar and into the night, the rain, the wind, the puddles.

Who was Kent Montana?

Well, he thought, for one thing, aside from being a righter of wrongs and a protector of the innocent, he was one very horny baron.

— CD

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Swamp Foetus: A Collection Of Short Stories, by Poppy Z. Brite, Borderlands Press, March 1993, \$50; 200 pages

Hype.

We're inundated with it these days, courtesy of the various media. There's certainly no shortage of hype in the realm of horror fiction, where we find, on a regular basis, laudatory quotes, superlative blurbs, and prophecies of future fame. Witness such recent recipients of the "rising star" label as Brian Hodge, Wayne Allen Sallec, Kathie Koja, and Norman Partridge. Poppy Z. Brite fits comfortably in this crowd, as evidenced by recent acclaim from the likes of Harlan Ellison and Dan Simmons; she was even featured in a special "Rising Stars" issue of *The Horror Show* magazine several years ago. Such hallowed heraldings, though, beget heady expectations. It's no small accomplishment that, more often than not, Brite lives up to these expectations.

Swamp Foetus collects virtually all of Brite's previously published fiction, twelve tales in total. Although the stories are not arranged in chronological order, the

dates of their original composition are listed at the end of each story. These dates serve to confirm the sense one gets of a writer in various stages of maturation. "Footprints in the Water," for example, is easily the least-accomplished work here, a pretentious riff on "The Monkey's Paw"; it is also one of the earliest, if not the earliest, of Brite's stories here, having been written in 1986. On the other end of the timeline, "Calcutta, Lord of Nerves" is one of the newest stories here, written in 1991, and it is stunningly good. Written for the anthology *Book Of The Dead II*, this tale contrasts the theme of the dead arising ravenously from their graves with the images of everyday Calcutta, where the streets are already filled with hungry *living* shamblers. As Brite herself puts it:

"...when I am begged from I always give. With my handful of coins, all five of them might have a bowl of rice and lentils tomorrow.

A bowl of rice and lentils in the morning, a drink of water from a broken standpipe at night.

It seemed to me that the dead were among the best-fed citizens of Calcutta."

Besides "Calcutta," many additional highlights can be found in

these pages. "His Mouth Will Taste of Wormwood" is a tale that has received some notoriety for its status as an updating of H.P. Lovecraft's story "The Hound." "Wormwood" is an excellent tale in its own right, concerning two debauchery-seeking young men, whose never-ending quest for new sensations leads them into grave-robbing and voodoo. "The Ash of Memory, The Dust of Desire" is a remarkable tale of urban decay-cum-evil, in the tradition of Fritz Leiber's "Smoke Ghost."

Several tales, including the accomplished "Angels" and "A Georgia Story," feature music and musicians prominently. In fact, almost all of the tales employ young, pale, disenchanted and rebellious protagonists—stereotypical Gothic/gloom rockers. Although the repetitive qualities of these characters occasionally border on the tedious, *Swamp Foetus* is nonetheless a very notable collection, one which chronicles the journey of a "rising star."

— Bob Morrish

Borderlands 3, edited by Thomas F. Monteleone, Borderlands Press, March 1993, \$65, 300 pages

Although the tide of antholo-

gies seems finally to be slowing a bit, there's still no shortage of short fiction available to horror fans. The majority of recent genre anthologies are real roller-coaster affairs, with plenty of both high points and low points throughout the course of their contents. Fortunately, *Borderlands 3* bucks this trend, displaying a consistently high level of quality (truth be told, there are a couple of real dogs here; however, out of 21 stories, that's certainly not a bad ratio).

Right out of the gate, Elizabeth Massie grabs the reader with "Brazo de Dios," a mysterious tale of divine intervention—with a price—into a tableau of Central American civil violence. J.L. Comeau's "The Owen Street Monster" is a chilling look at—believe it or not—vigilantes whose fires are struck by the stuff of daytime TV talk shows. "The Brotherhood" by John Alfred Taylor should go on to become every frat boy's nightmare, a melding of a traditional hazing with a not-so-traditional horror. In Ed Gorman's magnificently understated "The Ugly File," the focus is on real-life horrors, concerning a young couple's obsession with deformed children. In a sense, Steve Rasnic Tem's "Hungry" is an extension of Gorman's theme, as it depicts the struggles of a deformed child who has grown up and gone out into an unforgiving world—although Tem's world is decidedly more surreal than Gorman's. A welcome change of pace, in the form of some very black comedy, can be found in David Bischoff's "High Concept," which skewers much of the Hollywood scene in the course of explaining just where those "creative juices" come from.

Three of the best stories involve an exploration of the borders of reality. In Thomas Tessier's "The Banshee," the intrusion of an disturbed, obsessive young woman into a immigrant Irish bartender's life seems, upon retrospect, to be a

harbinger of horror and death, much like the Banshee of Irish legend. Lawrence C. Connolly's "Traumatic Descent," which details a desperate woman's visit to a psychiatrist, deserves a place in the Paranoid Horror Hall of Fame for its adept manipulations of the boundaries of reality and hallucination. The same goes for Whitley Strieber's "Horror Story," which is told from the viewpoint of "fictional" characters in a story that's being written; the characters are being tormented by their creator, the story's author—sort of like God picking on us humans. The reader learns from the characters that the author torpedoed his career by writing about his own, supposedly true, experiences with aliens (hmm...), and that he is also afflicted with cancer. The author is thus taking out his anger and frustrations on his characters. So...since the author in the story has written about his experiences with aliens—just like Strieber himself has done—and since the author in the story has cancer, does that mean that Strieber has cancer as well? Or is that just a red herring of sorts? Confused? Uncertain? You will be if you read this story.

There are other stories worthy of mention by Bentley Little, Kathleen Jurgens, Andrew Vachss, and Michael Cassutt. All in all, *Borderlands 3* should provide you with several hours of unsettling entertainment.

— Bob Morrish

Another Chance to Get it Right, by Andrew Vachss, Dark Horse Comics, Inc., \$20.00

If you like to read reviews unsullied by personal acquaintance of the reviewer to the author reviewed, you might want to pass this one by. In all fairness to the reader, I admit that I know Andrew Vachss. I know him and he's a

friend. I think I know at least some of what makes the man tick.

On the other hand, it is also true that I admired and respected his work long before I knew him. I read all of the "Burke" novels as soon as they hit the stand: *Flood*, *Strega*, *Blue Belle*, *Hard Candy*. I first met Andrew somewhere between *Blossom* and *Sacrifice*. So I'm coming to this review from both sides of the street; I would like to think I can bring some insight into the man and his writing from both a subjective and objective point of view.

Andrew Vachss is an attorney who handles only those cases involving juvenile justice and child abuse. He represents victims. When he writes, he writes about the people and events he knows best. Through Burke, Vachss' protagonist in his novels, we learn that there is evil out there, that it all too often prevails, and that children are often its prey.

We would feel more comfortable if we could believe that this evil confines itself to the sewers and back alleys, but Vachss never lets us get away with that. He tells us that the abusers and pedophiles, the child-buyers and the sleazeballs who film "kiddie porn" often wear the masks of respectability. In the movies, these men lurk around Times Square after dark. In real life, they live in Dallas and Boise, Idaho. They live in condos and family apartments, and in the house with the neatly-trimmed lawn next door to yours. The nice guy in the tie and suit rapes his own baby girl. The man who won the citizenship award last year doesn't collect postage stamps. He collects little boys.

Another Chance to Get it Right is a collection of allegories and parables concerning the subject closest to Vachss' heart: Protecting and nurturing our children; giving them the strength and the courage

to face the world; giving them the chance to grow up without scars.

On the title page of the book, Vachss says this is "a children's book for adults." He spells out his theme again in its final lines:

"What children are, more than anything else, is this: Another chance for your flawed species. Another chance to get it right."

Between the beginning and the end, the reader is treated to some of the most incredibly sensitive, downright beautiful writing that I, personally, have ever seen. This is strong praise, but I can't dilute my feelings on this. The magic is truly there. *Another Chance to Get it Right* is often more poetry than prose, and any reader who is not affected by the truth and compassion of these tales very likely has a heart and a soul that can't be reached at all.

In one of Vachss' stories, children at the zoo learn how a mother polar bear protects her young:

"My mother does that," one child says.

"Mine don't," says another.

What will these children become? Vachss asks. They could become anything, he tells us, and lets us consider the protected and the unprotected of the world. The implication here is clear: Our responsibility is a heavy one; what we are, what we do, our children will become.

We learn the difference between an elephant and an alligator; that one is born a predator, that it will always be what it was born to be. That the other, the elephant, comes into a world of choice. Again, as in the story of the polar bear mother, this is a choice the parents make. Nurturing, or the lack of it, will determine the offspring's fate.

In another tale, we see conflict, and then communication and understanding, between a mother and her daughter. Here once more, Vachss' theme is *protection*. Protection and strength are

themes he returns to again and again. Protection breeds strength. Strength armors us against the evils of the world. Vachss passionately believes this. It crops up continually in his novels, and it reflects his dedication to children as an attorney. Andrew Vachss always signs his letters with the words that guide his life: "Keep your strength."

In one of the most moving — and chilling — stories in *Another Chance to Get it Right*, Vachss tells us of a sexually-abused little girl in the courtroom. Here, Innocence meets the Evil, that of facing the man who abused her. Her attorney gives her the strength to get through this ordeal:

"Listen to me, now. You'll make yourself safe, child. The truth will shine out of you. It will shine on that man like a bright light. And he'll be afraid, then. Not you, him. That's what the truth does."

All of Andrew Vachss' fiction is based on actual cases of abuse; he has been personally involved in most of these cases himself. He has told me, and others, more than once, that the stories he has not recounted in his novels are uglier and more terrible than those he reports. He says he doesn't have to make anything up, that the evil out there is all too plentiful, and real.

One of the stories in this book has the flavor of a medieval fairy story in a contemporary setting. A young boy's mother loves roses. Her roses are ravished by Japanese beetles. The boy turns to books for help — gaining strength through knowledge — and learns that the preying mantis offers the protection his mother's roses need. Soon, these fierce little warriors have wiped out the beetle population in his mother's garden, and spread throughout the neighborhood. Years later, the boy returns to this setting. Much has changed, but the roses are still there. Protection creates a strong foundation for future growth. If love is nurtured, it prevails.

One thing I've noticed about early reviews of *Another Chance to Get it Right* is a supposed revelation that this book shows us "another side" of Andrew Vachss. That the street-wise Vachss of his novels is somehow a far different person than the writer who brings us the lyrical passages of *Another Chance to Get it Right*. I have to take issue with this. The world of Vachss' character, Burke, is indeed a harsh and cruel one, a world of violence, evil and death. But the reader who sees books such as *Flood*, *Blue Belle* and *Sacrifice* as nothing more than "hard-boiled" novels of crime has somehow missed the boat. *Compassion* is the strongest underlying theme in all of Vachss' work. His character, Burke, deals out justice in his own way. That justice is often final, and it emerges from Burke's fury at the crimes he sees committed upon the young. Every reader may not agree with Burke's solutions, but it is clear that his fury did not simply arise out of a vacuum. His deep sense of compassion for the abused is the emotion that fuels his anger.

The man who writes the Burke novels is the same man who has written *Another Chance to Get it Right*. I see no difference or conflict between the two.

Another Chance to Get it Right is illustrated by a number of artists, including Tim Bradstreet, Rick Geary and Gary Gianni. It is clear that the artists felt a special commitment to visualize the feelings the author meant to convey.

— Neal Barrett, Jr.

Midnight's Lair by Richard Laymon, New York: St. Martin's/Thomas Dunne, January 1993, 256 pp., \$18.95, hc.

Midnight's Lair was originally published in England in 1988 under the pseudonym Richard Kelly, but readers will find that it displays

all the familiar trademarks of Richard Laymon's American novels: slim plot, sex, fast pace, sex, a heroine whose spunkiness is offered as compensation for all the brutalities visited upon others of her sex, sex, gore, sex. I really didn't want to dwell on the sex, but Laymon obviously did. This is yet another of his books in which the credibility of the characters and their story sinks the moment their libidos rise.

Midnight's Lair is ostensibly the tale of thirty tourists who become trapped underground in Mordock's Cave when the resort above them is torched, and of the handful of friends and relatives who struggle to rescue them. Very quickly, the narrative breaks down into three story lines which Laymon alternates between to sustain a minimum of dramatic tension: the efforts of tour guide Darcy Raines and tourist Greg Beaumont to rescue the tour group from the Cave, the efforts of Darcy's mother Chris and her companion Hank to break through to the tour group through an artificial rock wall damming the Cave's lake, and the efforts of psychotic Kyle Mordock to rape Darcy.

Kyle is the linchpin for everything that goes wrong in the book. When the lights go out below, and everyone else begins fretting about food, oxygen, and the elements, his only thought is that he'll finally be able to take advantage of Darcy and dispose of her in the same way that he and his father have disposed of countless other female victims in the caverns. Even when he's being chased by rescue workers and something nasty from the far side of that rock wall, he wonders how quickly he can get Darcy's clothes off. Where Kyle's problems can be excused for the obvious twist in his gray matter, the same cannot be said for Greg and Darcy and Hank and Alice, who fall for one another in about five minutes and are repeatedly forced to suppress their passions to attend to

the business at hand. By the end of the story, we know more about their underwear than their personalities.

Laymon tries to prop his tale up with an underdeveloped subplot involving cannibal cave dwellers, a birth scene that rivals anything in Ray Garton's fiction, and a poke at supernatural horror writers oblivious to the horrors of real life, but to no avail. As with any story that plays its sex angle too early and for too long, *Midnight's Lair* is one long anticlimax.

— Stefan Dziemianowicz

Shadow Man by Dennis Etchison, *Dell/Abyss*, February 1993, 354 PP., \$4.99, mmp (ISBN 0-440-21202-2)

Dennis Etchison is best known for his short story work; as both a writer and an anthologist he's garnered a good deal of praise, as well as won an award or two over the years. Etchison has also written a handful of novels, mostly adaptations of films, sometimes under his own name, but more commonly as the pseudonymous Jack Martin (which, coincidentally, happens to be the name of *Shadow Man's* protagonist).

Though it may be better written than your average horror novel, and is being hyped as some kind of long-awaited literary event, *Shadow Man* really isn't all that great: it's an extremely uneven book, one which shifts from brilliant and highly entertaining to clichéd, predictable and trite in the space of mere pages. It's an odd book, one which is difficult to pin down.

Shadow Man's plot centers around the small Northern California town of Shadow Bay, a fog-shrouded community from which children are disappearing, children who have fallen victim to The Man With No Face, aka The Shadow Man, the bogeyman which

every child fears. In addition to being the hunting ground of The Man With No Face, Shadow Bay is also the home of Jack Martin, an artist/illustrator with a whole bunch of personal problems. Other major characters include: Jack's ex-wife, Leanne, who sometimes gets precognitive flashes (a power which is never really explained); her current boyfriend Steve, who is missing a hand and has a hook instead; Jack's big-hearted friend Will; Lissa, who works with runaway children, and is a friend of Will's; and Christopher, a little boy who The Man With No Face has a special interest in. But that's not all, there's also a mute bag lady and other assorted transients, a rather odd police chief, a retired movie director, a band of dump-dwellers who have rejected society as a whole and formed their own community, a quartet of adventurous pre-teens, an over-stressed multi-plex theater manager, and last, but by no means least, The Man With No Face himself.

Shadow Man's biggest weakness, for me, is its rather haphazard plot. Etchison seems so intent upon impressing us with his flashy writing that he's forgotten that it's always best to have things make sense. *Shadow Man's* ending stretches believability (and coincidence) just a little bit too far; within the space of about fifteen pages, Etchison attempts to tie all those characters, and a ton of plot points, together, with the end result being a jumbled mess which is about as clear as the mud which runs down the rain-washed hills of Shadow Bay.

As much as I disliked some elements of *Shadow Man* — like the fact that it reads more like a screenplay treatment which has been padded out to novel length than something which was a novel from the start — I still have to begrudgingly recommend it. While, at times, *Shadow Man* is all style and

little substance, there are still a few scattered scenes and vignettes which rank right up there with Etchison's best short story work. It's for this reason, and this reason alone, that the book is worth checking out; even if you don't like *Shadow Man* as a whole, it's hard to not be impressed by some of its component pieces. Recommended, but with reservations.

— Mike Baker

Bigfoot by Richard Hoyt, Tor, January 1993, 224 pp., \$17.95, hc (ISBN 0-312-85278-9)

Man does not live by horror alone, which is why I like to spice up my reading diet with some out-of-genre books whenever I get the chance. A couple of issues back, I reviewed Richard Hoyt's *Marimba*, which I discovered after a copy was sent my way for review purposes. I really enjoyed that book, which was a twisted look at a female drug running family in Miami who dabbled in magic and fed their pet Doberman the body parts of their rivals; it was a good fun read all around, if you ask me.

Another Hoyt book recently found its way to me. *Bigfoot* is the name of this one, and it features Hoyt's series character, John Denson. Denson may be a private investigator, but he's certainly not from the hardboiled Sam Spade school. Nor is he a Quixotic philosopher ala Travis McGee. Denson is a smartass cynic who enjoys the more relaxing aspects of life, prefers to use logic instead of his fists, and doesn't carry a gun. His best friend, and business partner, is Willie Prettybird, an Indian who may, or may not, be a shaman (as well as Coyote in human form, a fact which Willie will neither confirm, nor deny). In *Bigfoot* the pair find themselves involved with a hunt for Sasquatch in the mountains of Oregon — a search which

has a \$100,000 cash prize — as well as a couple of murders.

Hoyt is one of those writers whose work grabs you right from the start and never lets go. From the very first paragraph, *Bigfoot* is interesting, and it stays that way right up to the end, which is delightfully ambiguous (as well it should be, because anything else just wouldn't have fit with the rest of the book's tone). Hoyt's writing style is so natural, you just flow right into the story, getting caught up in the adventures (and misadventures) of the characters, quickly forgetting that you're reading a book. You'll also end up learning something, too, if you're not careful; not only is *Bigfoot* filled with info about Sasquatch, but some very intelligent ruminations about evolution in general, and how males and females interact in particular.

If you're looking for a change of pace from your standard horror fare, you might want to give *Bigfoot*, or any of Richard Hoyt's other books, a try. Recommended.

— Mike Baker

Blackburn by Bradley Denton, St. Martin's, February 1993, 296 pp., \$19.95, hc (ISBN 0-312-08705-5)

Before picking up this book, I'd never read any of Bradley Denton's work, though I had seen his name before in *Pulphouse*, and was aware that he'd written a SF novel whose title I'd always liked (*Buddy Holly is Alive and Well on Ganymede*). After finishing *Blackburn*, I wish that I'd discovered him sooner.

Blackburn tells the story of Jimmy Blackburn, a young man who drifts around the country, killing people he thinks deserve to die: sadistic cops, crooked auto mechanics, dishonest encyclopedia salesmen, unfaithful newlweds, etc. Jimmy's adventures are re-

counted in an episodic manner (parts of this book previously appeared as short stories in *Pulphouse* and *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*), making this a perfect book for readers who are too busy to devour a novel in one sitting, only having the time for quick bites instead. The only problem is that once you start reading *Blackburn*, you have such a good time that it's really hard to keep from reading just one more section. Denton's prose is truly a joy to behold; it's terse, yet evocative at the same time, and always eminently readable.

Blackburn is one of those books which you can't really define, which refuses to fit into any one specific genre. It's about a guy who kills people, so technically it's horror, but it's also biting funny and poignant at the same time (two things most horror novels most definitely aren't). On the back cover of my galley copy of *Blackburn*, Denton's writing is compared to that of Robert R. McCammon and Dan Simmons. While that comparison may be correct in some regards — all three do mix horror with a kind of Ray Bradburyish love of Americana — it isn't wholly accurate. Most of the work of Simmons and McCammon lack something which *Blackburn* excels at: humor. This is a damn funny book, one which had me laughing out loud more than once. Denton's writing may sometimes resemble Simmons' and McCammon's, but it's also very much akin to the satirical works of Robert Sheckley and early Terry Southern (especially *The Magic Christian*). Like Sheckley and Southern, Denton attacks the foibles of society, exposing them with relentless abandon. Jimmy Blackburn is a modern-day Everyman, someone who any reader can relate to, even if he is a killer.

Do yourself a favor and pick up a copy of *Blackburn*; unless you are totally devoid of a sense of

humor. I'm sure that you'll enjoy it. Highly recommended.

— Mike Baker

Skin by Kathe Koja, Delacorte Press/Abyss, March 1993, 320 pp., \$19.95, hc (ISBN 0-385-30899-X)

Skin is Kathe Koja's third novel, as well as the second hardcover release from Abyss. It's also one of the most downright disturbing pieces of fiction I've read in a long, long time.

Skin tells the story of Tess, a woman who, all her life, has been in love with the inherent beauty of metal. Though scoffed and jeered at because it's considered a man's trade, she learns how to weld, how to work metal, as well as how to make metal work for her. As the novel begins, Tess spends most of her time fashioning metal sculptures which most galleries are afraid to show — they're too extreme, too daring, they say — supporting herself by doing pick-up work at metal and body shops. Enter Bibi, a dancer who senses the inherent power of Tess' work. Bibi teams up with Tess and forms the Surgeons of the Demolition, a performance art group which fuses dance with Tess' sculptures. The Surgeons quickly become successful, due in a large part to Tess' skill at building more and more complex — and eventually mobile — constructs. Bibi seeks to grow as well, but through a different outlet. Through body modification, she seeks to become, in her own way, as fluid, menacing and perfect as Tess' creations. Bibi goes too far, though, and tragedy ensues when an accident occurs during one of the Surgeon's performances, claiming the life of one of its members. The group breaks up. Tess and Bibi grow closer, then eventually split, each seeking to raise their art to new, higher levels.

If you like to ruminate upon

these kind of things, I guess *Skin* can be called a look at the creation of art, an examination of the struggles an artist goes through daily, as well as an exploration of the fine line between obsession and madness, and the dangerous realms which lay beyond. If you're a bit more pragmatic, though, you'll probably want to know that *Skin*'s real strength lies not in its subtexts (define them as you may) but in the fact that it's an interesting, well-plotted, story filled with characters who you really care about. Also to be found are quite a few surprising plot twists, an insightful look at the decidedly different world of performance art, and a wealth of information on body modification; what it is, who does it and why, and most importantly, how, like anything else in life, it can be taken to dangerous extremes.

Much of the power of *Skin* lies in the inclusion of this fascinating, and in many ways grotesque, subculture. What goes on in this book mirrors reality, and that, in itself, is what makes it so terrifying; if you think that pierced nostrils are extreme, and pierced nipples are unthinkable, then this book probably isn't for you.

When you get right down to it, there's nothing supernatural or otherworldly about *Skin*; it's psychological horror, pure and simple. It's also one of the best novels Abyss has published to date. Recommended.

— Mike Baker

Hottest Blood, edited by Jeff Gelb and Michael Garrett, Pocket Books, \$5.50 (ISBN 0-671-75367-3)

This is the third volume in the *Hot Blood* series of erotic horror anthologies. Despite the seeming completion of the trilogy, I recently learned that Pocket Books has contracted for a fourth collection. I wonder what the title of that

one will be, *Hotter Than The Hottest Hot Blood*?

Like the previous two books, this anthology features several memorable tales, a few adequate stories, and a handful of mediocre yarns.

The best of the bunch are: "I Hear the Mermaids Singing" by Nancy Holder, "The Last Crossing" by Thomas Tessler, "Damaged Goods" by Elizabeth Massie, "Abuse" by Matthew Costello, and "How Deep the Taste of Love" by John Shirley.

The only real problem with this collection is that even though the stories are reasonably diverse, sex is such a limited theme that trying to read more than two or three of these tales at a time becomes monotonous and boring. But if read in small doses, *Hottest Blood* is an entertaining anthology worth adding to your collection.

— Roman A. Ranieri

Boneman, by Lisa W. Cantrell, Tor Books, \$18.95 (ISBN 0-312-85307-6)

Cantrell's new novel, her first hardcover from Tor, is a cross-genre book that neatly blends nearly equal parts of police procedural with supernatural horror.

A trio of protagonists, reporter J.J. Spencer, policeman Dallas Reid, and North Carolina Bureau of Investigation agent Jackie Swann investigate a series of apparently drug-related murders. During the early stages of the story, things progress in a logical and straightforward manner. However, once the heroes discover that the local drug lord has been using voodoo to control and expand his illegal empire, the tale rapidly shifts into high gear.

There are a few stumbles in logic along the way, but the story is interesting enough to allow you to overlook them without too much effort. Cantrell's brisk pacing

keeps you wanting to know what happens next.

The ending also features two plot twists that are surprisingly effective. *Boneman* should be an enjoyable read for both horror and crime fans alike.

— Roman A. Ranieri

Nightmare Flower, by Elizabeth Engstrom, Tor Books, \$18.95 (ISBN 0-312-85404-8)

With this collection of twenty original and reprinted tales, Engstrom merits notice as an extremely talented writer. Her style is precise and lyrical; her use of mood and atmosphere exceptional.

Although most of the stories readily fall into the *quiet horror* category, several tales such as "Nightmare Flower," "Will Lunch Be Ready On Time?" and "The Jeweler's Thumb Is Turning Green" contain scenes as gruesome as anything from the overrated *Splatterpunk* tribe.

The novella, "Project Stone" is the most surprising story of the group. It concerns a utopian city in the Arizona desert where an unusual machine emits a tone intended to relieve stress, thereby creating a healthier, more relaxed population. But things are not as they seem. Engstrom ends the tale with a masterfully chilling and unexpected twist.

For anyone unfamiliar with Engstrom's work, *Nightmare Flower* would be an excellent introduction.

— Roman A. Ranieri

Audio

The Thing on the Doorstep, by H.P. Lovecraft, *The Lovecraft Tapes Volume One*, narrated by Jay Gregory,

Voice at Work, Inc., 1992, one cassette, 70 minutes, \$15.00, unabridged.

As I settled down to listen to this cassette, I felt a sense of ardent anticipation mingled with a touch of dread. The anticipation was due to the fact that Lovecraft is one of my favorite authors (it was his work that initiated my interest in the horror genre). The dread was because Lovecraft's dark moodiness and dated language can sound incoherent or even downright silly if read by an actor with only moderate talents.

However, once the performance began, I quickly realized that I was in for a huge treat. Gregory's tone and pacing were excellent. His vivid narration flowed so smoothly that even the few potentially confusing sections of the story were clear and simple to follow.

There is very little use of music during the performance; mainly at the beginning, the end, and interspersed throughout the narration to highlight key moments of shocking revelation. Actually, since the story is told in retrospect by a second-person narrator, the sparse music greatly helps to evoke a chilling sense of menace and impending doom.

"The Thing On the Doorstep" is a highly entertaining presentation of a remarkable Lovecraft classic. I look forward to hearing Mr. Gregory's performance on the second tape in this new series.

— Roman A. Ranieri

Software

THE DARK HALF, Capstone

I have suffered for you, gentle reader. I have played *THE DARK HALF* so that you don't have to.

Just when you thought you'd

had enough of licensed "software adaptations" of movies; just when you thought *The Taking of Beverly Hills* and *Home Alone* were tucked safely away in discount bins, where they could do the least harm; just when you thought Capstone would give up the ghost, along comes this smoldering turkey, this pinnacle of screaming incompetence, this turgid, painful, rank bit of time-wasting mindlessness "adapted" from the ill-fated George Romero film of Stephen King's bestseller to pollute your computer screens. Utterly devoid of logic, sense, or creativity, *THE DARK HALF* managed to give me throbbing headaches through several gaming sessions, but little more.

THE DARK HALF? you might ask. *I know it was a book, but when was it a movie?*

Well, that's a whole 'nother story. The film, starring Timothy Hutton and directed by horror auteur George Romero (*Night of the Living Dead*, *Creepshow*, etc), was sucked into the vacuum of Orion Pictures' bankruptcy, and so has not yet been released.

Still, that didn't keep Capstone from licensing the product, and pouncing on the first computer adaptation of a Stephen King book since *The Mist*, way back when. King has resisted opportunities to adapt his work—or allow it to be adapted—for the gaming medium, so it was only through a bit of contractual loopholierie that Capstone got the property at all. Unfortunately, *THE DARK HALF* is sure to send King screaming into the night before he actually considers allowing game companies another shot at adapting his eminently adaptable work.

For those not familiar with King's novel, it is the story of a famous mainstream writer named Thad Beaumont, who also writes a series of gritty suspense novels (starring "Alexis Machine") under the pseudonym of George Stark. A sleaze named Fred Clawson

learns that Beaumont is actually Stark, and threatens to let the world know unless Beaumont pays up. Beaumont makes the announcement himself, saying that Stark is "dead" and that he will write no more Alexis Machine books. They hold a mock funeral for "Stark" in the local cemetery (or is that sematary?), but Stark won't die so easily. It appears that the writer and his pseudonym have become, to use the current vernacular, "codependent." Stark becomes real, and he's not happy about being "killed" by Thad.

In the game, we first join our hero in the graveyard, where Stark's mock grave has been disturbed. Shortly thereafter a reporter named Homer Gamache is killed. More murders—all people Thad knows—ensue. The evidence points to Thad as the culprit. He must assemble the clues to prove his innocence and acquire the knowledge to defeat Stark.

Sounds like a decent premise, doesn't it? Unfortunately, in *THE DARK HALF*, the puzzles that drive any adventure game, the graphics and sound that help create the world, and the flow of action range from the merely mediocre to the downright dreadful.

First, the graphics. Instead of looking as though they were created with the full palette of computer colors, they appear to have been created using the 24-color box of Crayola crayons. While some screens rise to being merely average, the world they create is drab and uninteresting, lifeless in the extreme. Sound is limited to repetitious music, a smattering of fuzzy voices, and some marginal effects.

The game engine—in the form of a typewriter—allows for no default setting, so one has to continually click on an action and then go on a pixel hunt just to "look" at the scene. More elements of bad design can be seen in Thad's living

room, which you can only leave by walking "into" a cabinet; a close-up screen which has four directional arrows that are never needed; and the constant repetition of dialogue options which you have already chosen.

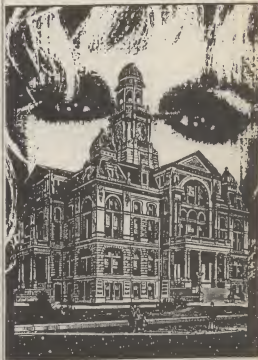
And the dialogue! Eeek! The dialogue tree is so poorly designed that if you don't choose EXACTLY THE RIGHT WORDS IN EXACTLY THE RIGHT ORDER—most particularly during police interrogation—you will find yourself dropped to DOS with your only memory being the *GAME OVER* screen. During these interrogations—which happen with numbing frequency—the most normal responses (protestations of innocence, facts in your behalf, tricky things like *THE TRUTH*) are often wrong, and will end the game. You need to make dumb choices to get anywhere. For instance, the ONLY way to get a razor is to threaten to kill an innocent barber. What?!

The items you have to collect and the ways in which you use them are also cause for pause. I know I always go around removing incriminating evidence from a crime scene, draining the water from a fishtank to get a bird whistle (which is never used, by the way) stuck in the bottom of a vase, and lighting up crushed cigarette butts to help me write. Blank pieces of paper conveniently show up at every crime scene, just in time for Thad to go into a trance and write another "clue." Few puzzles go beyond the inane, and this is certainly the worst part of the game. Nothing makes SENSE. It all seems so terribly random, yet the design is such that things can only be done ONE WAY. Miss that way—which is easy to do when actions make so little sense—and it's bye-bye-baby.

It all builds to a sloppy, hodgepodge ending scene that I still don't understand (and I read the book!), and a denouement that was, literally, one second long.

When are game designers going to learn from Lucas, and stop making games where the only way to figure out how to do something is to die, reload, and try again sixteen different ways? When are we going to be rid of games that are more torment than pleasure? That constantly punish the gamer for logical thinking? Games like *THE DARK HALF* are a dying breed, and we will be well rid of them.

— T. Liam McDonald



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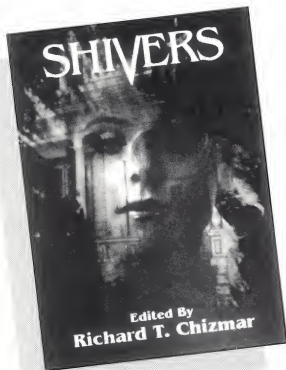
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